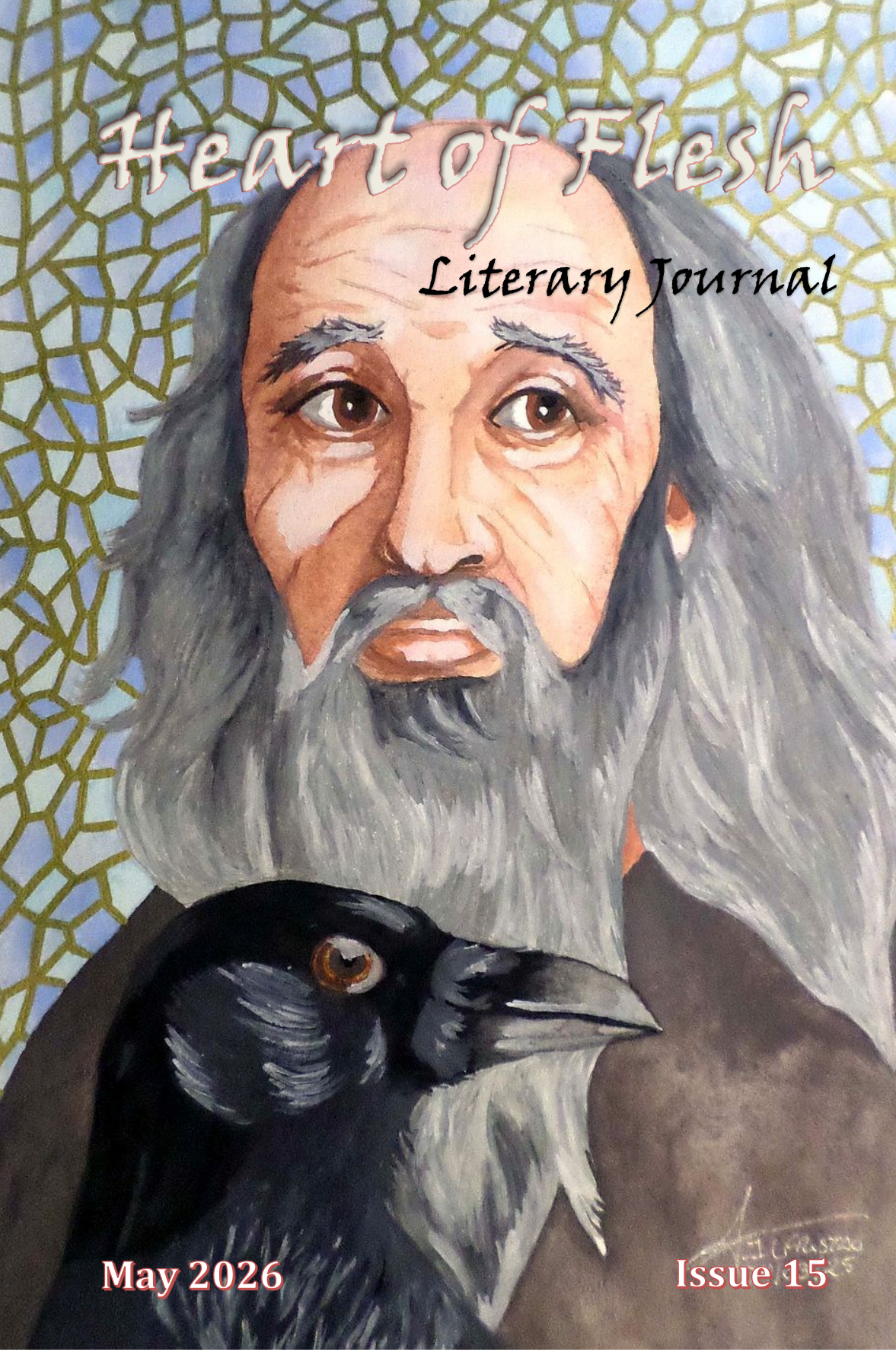


Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



May 2026

Issue 15

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Heart of Flesh Literary Journal
Mobile, Alabama

HEART OF FLESH LITERARY JOURNAL

Issue 15 | May 2026

Mobile, Alabama, USA

Editor: Veronica McDonald

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Prayer Warrior II (2025) by Veronica McDonald, acrylic on canvas.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*

– Proverbs 13:12 (NIV)

Waiting is hard. But, hard or not, when you're a Christian, waiting on God is just a part of everyday life. In fact, it is a *crucial* part. Even as a God-fearing woman, there have been innumerable times when I knew what I wanted and I wanted it now, with all the patience of Veruca Salt from *Willy Wonka* (can I get an "Amen" from my impatient people?). But waiting reminds us of several important truths: 1) you are not in control - - God is; 2) you do not know what's best -- God does; 3) God is not a cosmic genie here to grant all your wishes. He's your Heavenly Father. He can tell you no. He can tell you it's not the right time. And – while it pleases Him to give you your heart's desires – His goal is to shape you to become more like Christ. And so, examine yourself and ask, will you stop loving God if your hopes have not yet become reality? If your prayers remain unanswered, if you can't feel His presence, if longing has turned to weariness in the depths of your bones, will you stop loving Him? Stop following Him? Stop believing in who He is? These are the questions He will sometimes challenge us with. There are times when we hope and we long and we wait, and nothing seems to change. But when that happens, think of Jesus asleep in the boat while his disciples encountered the storm. Think of how they shook him, asking, "Teacher, do you not care (...)?" And remember – after He calms the storm – what He says to them in response: "Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:38-39)

In Issue 15, our writers have experienced hope deferred. Many in this issue display discouragement as they wait on God and wrestle with the purpose of the suffering and intense longing in their lives. Here you'll find poets who yearn for lost innocence and for the Eden-like state of heaven. You'll

find storytellers who wrestle with unanswered prayers of having children or a spouse. Others long for rest, and for freedom from worry, from mental anguish, and from the consequences of sin. The writers and characters here give a sense that they are holding their breath, waiting and watching for God. But while some let their hearts grow weary, many cling desperately to the source of their hope, to the One who will sooner or later plant the tree of life in their barren soil. Through the cracks, and the doubts, and the sicknesses of heart, these writers will show you Jesus – His goodness, His love, and the abundant hope we have in Him.

Thank you to all the writers and artists who have entrusted *Heart of Flesh* with your work. We're truly blessed by your creativity and craft. Thank you to Katie Yee for all of her meticulous hard work in reading submissions and helping with the selection process. Of course, I also thank my husband and children for their constant love and support.

And thank *you*, for reading our 15th issue. I hope that the God of all hope touches your heart through the creative offerings of these talented people.

May God bless you and keep you,

Veronica McDonald

Veronica McDonald
Editor/Founder

POETRY

POETRY

Christina Ridders

G O D

I fell down the subway station stairs and shattered
my ankle, and all I could do was say sorry.
My leg swelled green like a new balloon
and the shock set me on fire, vision swimming,
a shrinking vignette, and I kept saying, "I'm sorry,"
"Thank you," and "What do you need me to do?"
with artificial bright eyes, like tumbling
down concrete wasn't a thing I did, like I wasn't expanding
with new bruises, like they needed me.
"What can I do?"

I think this is how God sees me: torn cartilage
and ruptured ligaments, disjointed fingers held out
in protest, still trying to get a handle
on my transit card, still asking, "What can I do for you?",
still saying, "I'm really sorry about this."

ON SINGLENES AT THIRTY

After Amy Bornman

I.

How did I end up here again,
hands cupped as for alms, heart
oozing viscera through my fingers?
My grip is slipping.
My grip is slipping, please.

II.

God, I have lived my life
as hallowed ground: sequestered,
hard-packed. What day of creation,
pray tell, did you make the shovel?
Please tell me you made the shovel.

III.

Hope is the carrot
You have dangled before me —
which makes me an ass.
I'm not hungry anymore.
Please. I'm not hungry anymore.

Christina Ridders lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, with her three cats. Her past work can be found in *genesis* literary and art magazine. She believes the kindest thing you can do for someone is to tell them the truth. For work, Christina writes. For fun, she also writes. She is not a robot.

POETRY

Richard A. Decker

ON BECOMING A BETTER MAN

I: Refocused

I tend to write rain checks that bounce but I decide to put myself out there by brushing shoulders and making the best of a get-together.

I bring cheddar sour cream chips and a case of Coke 'cause I want to somehow break the bad habits from my upbringing and somehow show them that I know how to be polite even though the host said she should be good on snacks.

I want to show them that I can take care of myself — that I'm my own man.

I get to the introductions and small talk that can sometimes make me wince because I just seem to know but can't know for sure that most people can't stand what I do for a living. I get defensive like I tend to do and get obnoxious like I tend to do and I even mention how I tend to struggle relating to Christians even *as* a Christian.

I put all my flaws up front — like I tend to do.

I give my view on being an English teacher and how it's different from what they probably think and how I went to college like the grown-ups told me to so I can have a better life than them. I talk to a guy who has a *real* good STEM job and to his buddy who works a *real* good labor job and try to relate and do relate in some ways until they seemingly suggest

that in some ways the humanities are not that important. I listen because I want to be polite because they might be right.

I drank too much coffee and end up taking a bathroom break —

Above the sink
 on the mirror a sticky note reads,
 “Focus on your relationship with God.”

II: Redirected

I brush shoulders
 put myself out there
 at round tables
 drinking coffee
 with men from all around —

different backgrounds
 different jobs.

Laborers
 realtors
 engineers
 psychologists
 teachers —

we're all here
 in need of a fresh start.

We admit
 our struggles

our fears
 our weaknesses
 our strengths —

we're all the same
 in our differences.

We laugh like children
 at immature jokes
 We choke up like babies
 listening to tough testimonies
 We are redirected —

walking with Peter through his denial
 and his redemption.

We see it all
 in our marriages
 in our singleness
 in ourselves
 we give it all to the Lord —

we sing in worship
 as I keep tempo on the cajon.

III: Affirmed

At the bible study sitting by the fire kindling,
 we read Scripture aloud.

We mention how it's good that the church gives us time each Sunday for silent

confession,
 where we can put all our flaws up front — with God, like we’re supposed to.

We talk about the need to talk better with people we disagree with,
 and I apologetically mention Alyosha’s response to Ivan from *The Brothers
 Karamazov*.

It’s surprisingly well received ‘cause the host has read it before,
 and the group seems to see how it connects back to Scripture.

And we drink coffee,
 and I take a bathroom break —

On the wall I see
 framed stained-glass art that reads,
 “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

... my newfound focus affirmed.

Richard A. Decker is interested in how literature reveals God’s truth, and his writing has appeared in *Ekstasis*, *Oak Grove Review*, *Immersed: A Journal of Faith, Arts, and Letters*, *MoralApologetics*, *Christ and Pop Culture*, and elsewhere. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Literature and Criticism at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

POETRY

Regina McMorris

PEDESTRIAN

Tonight the silver moon reveals its lower half
through translucent clouds, the shape
like a watermelon slice. As the clouds shift,
I forget the weight of my dirty laundry as I drag

my suitcase down Colton Avenue, and I don't
miss having a ride to the coin-op.

The hidden half of the moon, larger
than the half I can see. As they whirl by,

cars leave behind the taste of oil. If I had a license,
I'd be there by now, loading lights
and darks into the same washer.

Two weeks ago, Terry Lacey promised to teach me

to drive as she trimmed the hairs from my neck
before my date. I have yet to tell her
I was asleep by midnight the same night my ex
drove the actress to Forest Falls. My feet speed up.

I try to forget: the meteor shower started
after two a.m., and I slept through it. The muscles in my thighs
tighten: the coin-op is closed.

Before I can think — *God, where are you?* —

a single meteor slides like a tear down an invisible cheek.

I turn back with my dirty laundry suitcase in tow,
my back to the half moon, knowing
my head will rest safely on my pillow before midnight.

P R I D E

This thin black rock,
sharp enough to slit
a wolf's throat. Still
I wear it under
my skin with my
other organs:

liver, intestines,
spleen. A soft cloud
bruises an otherwise
clear sky. When I
fall face down, mud
returns my hug.

A frog kisses
my filthy face.
The belief that
I should have been
perfect surprises
everyone but me.

Regina McMorris has a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. She is currently an English Professor at Blinn College in Bryan, Texas. Her poems have appeared in various literary magazines, including *Mid-American Review* and *Gulf Coast*.

POETRY

Kyler Littlejohn

HARD FAITH

We were born to red earth
and hand-me-down prayers,
to mothers who knelt in the fields
and called that kneeling faith.

Our fathers were men of silence,
their ghosts planted deep,
roots tangled in grief and duty,
their shadows stretching farther
than the cotton rows.

We learned to make peace
with what we couldn't change,
the sky's long refusal,
the way work wears down a name.
Still, there was music in it:
the creak of porch boards,
the low hum of a hymn
carried through supper steam.

The years came hard,
but so did laughter —
quick, bright, and gone too soon.
We buried our dead,
tilled the same soil,
and prayed the ground would remember

more than just our sorrow.

The ones who left carried dust
in the hems of their skirts,
the ones who stayed
learned to call the drought a season,
not a curse.

Either way, we kept tending
hope like a row of beans
we refused to let die.

Now I tell my daughters
that faith is not a church pew,
it's a seed that outlives you,
a quiet thing
that keeps pushing through dry ground.

Kyler Littlejohn is a junior at the University of Texas at Tyler, majoring in Education with a minor in English. Inspired by a rural upbringing, her writing explores themes of faith, family, hardship, and love. Her work has previously been published in Tyler Junior College's *Bell Tower Arts Journal*.

POETRY

Elle Rosamilia

RECURRING DREAMS

I.

I hear my father's footsteps coming closer.
I can't drive, but I'm still trapped behind the wheel.
The people I love keep disappearing through empty doorways.
There is a face I used to trust and a stranger who plans to do me harm.

II.

The space between bedtime and morning becomes a tunnel
through my brain. As I sleep, I wander corridors in search of symbols that will show
me all the ways I haven't healed, dig through chests in childhood bedrooms
whose furniture shifts every time I blink my eyes. Where is the map
my teacher gave me in twelfth grade? Where is the key I found
buried at the bottom of a poem I wrote when I was nine?
Where is the door that leads out into daylight?
I can't open my eyes wide enough so I run my hands along the walls
as my feet stumble into a run, as every door swings open into nothing
but bottomless black. The corridor loops around my skull in a spiral
staircase that drops its steps beneath my feet like loose teeth
and my feet catch on the gaps until I'm crawling
upward on all fours in circles around a tower
that's collapsing from the bottom up.

III.

You promised me rest for body, mind, and soul,
You who tore the temple down and built it back up in three days.
Come then. Siphon out the dark through keyholes,

snap the rafters' spines, shatter every watching window's eye.
I want to lie down to sleep in the center of this rubble if it means
the light will finally get through.

Elle Rosamilia grew up in upstate New York, spent years in North Africa and the UK after college, and now works as a bookseller in Mississippi. Her debut poetry collection, *The Mourner's Almanac*, explores seasons of grief and hope. She has poems published in *Prosetrics*, *Vessels of Light*, and others.

POETRY

Sarah Goldston

M E L E E D I A M O N D

As small as a poppyseed
Almost an appleseed
These comparisons seem
So unfitting

As if disregarded muffin crumbs
Or apple pits
Could capture the significance
Of a child

But rather a melee diamond
Small but greatly treasured
Mined for in the dark hours
Of my prayer closet

Holding my lower abdomen
And a sacred secret
Across skin and muscles and tendons
I cradled you

Alongside my heart
Dreams of names and nurseries
You too were supposed
To grow

You came into my world

As two pink lines
Too quickly, as red streaks
You went away

Cramps echo loss
Hands cradle nothing
But a wobbly faith
I lift them to the sky

With a question “Why, O Lord?”
He answers with weeping, too
He can carry this heaviness
Of emptiness

He who has carried death
Yet lives, to him
Creation groans for resurrection
I am waiting

To see all things made new
The new earth lined with gemstones
A diamond
Reflecting everlasting light

Sarah Goldston lives in the rolling hills of central North Carolina with her husband and young daughter. She is an amateur poet, inspired by her journey of motherhood, living in the country, and working in the mental health field. She desires for her writing to point to the hope and peace we have in Christ.

POETRY

Ellen Jane Powers

ON BEING THE FIRST WOMAN IN THIS WORLD

The soles of my feet are dull gray,
years of dirt I couldn't avoid, and
they no longer come clean. I taught
myself to step aside, to not answer questions
from silver-eyed strangers who test me —
are you lost? No. I turn toward unexpected
paths. I look for a river bed, the one that's lined
with late spring lilacs, nectar as sweet
as what I tasted long ago. I want to forget
the dried mud of love, the exposed roots
of torn desire which blackened my feet.
I keep rubbing those spots. I want the soles
of my innocence — pink, untethered, scented
with rosewater and lily-of-the-valley —
I want this faint recollection of a garden,
its gate aflame, so I might step in once more.

TREE SONG

The birch is singing,
its catkins tuned to the east wind.
From my seaside porch
I regard the composition
as the wind plucks the maple
and changes key.

Fog drifts in, curtaining
the islands, changing the tempo —
I hear a church bell ring
its hymn of the hour,
its amen dampens my lips
as the tree song becalms
and sinks into the sea.

Ellen Jane Powers lives on the North Shore of Boston. Her life and career have taken many twists and turns, but she's not strayed from pursuing Spirit. She spent 12 years on the editorial review board of a small literary journal from Maine. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals and in two collections of poetry, *Celestial Navigation* (Cherry Grove) and *Toward the Beloved* (Finishing Line).

POETRY

David Anson Lee

THE WEIGHT OF GOD

The sky does not split.
No curtain lifts.
Afternoon keeps its appointments:
dogs barking,
bread cooling on windowsills,
a child practicing scales
in the next room
while God bleeds outside the city.

They finish efficiently.
Iron through flesh,
flesh through bone:
a skill perfected by repetition.
Someone wipes his hands on his tunic,
wonders if his wife remembered
the lentils.

He hangs like a question
no one wants to answer.
Not thunder. Not glory.
Just weight:
the hard grammar of gravity
holding divinity in place.

Even the faithful step back.
Love falters

when it smells like iron,
when salvation looks identical
to another failed man.

The sky darkens anyway,
as if ashamed.
The earth holds its breath
but does not yet release it.

This is how it ends,
we think.
God learning abandonment,
learning how far down
love is willing to go.

HOLY SATURDAY

Nothing happens today.

The women wait with spices
they cannot use.
The men hide in borrowed rooms,
reciting their failures
like psalms without tune.

The stone stays shut.
The body stays gone.
Heaven says nothing.

This is the day we recognize:
when prayers return unopened,

when faith feels like a match
cupped in wind,
when God appears to have misjudged
the cost of love.

Somewhere beneath the earth
a heart no longer beats,
and yet —
something presses back,
a pressure building
where death thought it had finished.

If redemption is coming,
it is late.
If resurrection is real,
it is quiet.

We sit with our doubt
like mourners at a wake,
waiting to see
if the dead will stay dead.

THE GARDENER CALLS HER NAME

She mistakes him at first
for someone ordinary:
which may be resurrection's
truest detail.

A man among trees.
Soil under his nails.
Morning doing what it always does.

She is crying,
because love remembers too much,
because hope is dangerous
after burial.

Then her name:
not thunder,
not sermon,
just breath
and recognition.

The wound remains.
The scars stay open.
Resurrection does not undo the body;
it redeems it.

Death has been robbed,
not destroyed:
a thief startled mid-act,
dropping what it cannot carry.

He does not stay.
He never does.
Faith must learn to live
without holding on.

But the garden is altered.
The air keeps his voice.
The future breaks open
like a tomb
that has lost its argument.

And we,
still carrying our Fridays,
still limping through Saturdays —
are invited
not to certainty,
but to follow
a risen God
who looks, at first,
like a stranger
calling us by name.

David Anson Lee is a physician, philosopher, and poet whose work appears in *Right Hand Pointing*, *Unbroken Journal*, *The Scarred Tree*, and other literary journals. He writes on faith, human resilience, and the intersections of body, spirit, and daily life, seeking to illuminate spiritual truths through evocative imagery and lyrical narrative.

POETRY

Sarah Tate

EDEN WRITING HER OWN OBITUARY

DEATH ANNOUNCEMENTS AND FUNERAL NOTICES

THE GARDEN OF EDEN — brutally murdered by words twisted like smoke and buried to rot under sloughs of snakeskins. Do you smell my cries? I wanted to leave something of account: a bard's song, maybe, some sad rhymes for the poets, a couple words thrown onto a Wikipedia page. My story like an arc for the unborn, you know. Instead, you consider my paradise lost like you would chew on a vague memory. When you hear a myth about an old Greek sailor limping toward a banquet, something pricks you. It's the same ache when air smells of flame, when you remember how your father spun you in his arms, the sky a swirl of slippery stars. That feeling of something infinite beyond the horizon. I know. My *after* angers me, too. Misery means absence, every bone scraped clean. How all you ever longed for, all warmth and wonder, is a voice muffled by the wall: half-heard, instantly forgotten, like night songs of crickets and frogs. Low winds, my death rises ghostly like shawls of white mist. You cannot sleep. Moon-water light on the floor, sky like black stone. You stare at the wall, knowing when you close your eyes, your dreams will smell faintly of flowers, my impossible flowers.

ALL THE NIGHT UP THERE

after three hours of staring at a sky for stars I know won't be there

1. (first hour)

God, I want to believe you.
That you're really there squinting through dust,
ready (and willing) to carry bones
down old valley roads like sacks of flour,
having every intention of threading
laughter through them — to make them
children again, all twinkle and gold,
faces pressed against the glass
of the world, not afraid to clutch
at light, even if it burns.

2. (second hour)

The future isn't what it used to be.
Like Samson, I am, with both hands
trying to scoop honey from carcasses
of hollowed-out dreams. Sometimes
I think you're a God of riddles rather
than parables. I admit, the candles
of those wise and foolish virgins
throw wide shadows on the walls.
Wait, watch, time moves on, but when
will it end? We all fall asleep, don't we?

3. (third hour)

I think you're sad, too, knowing
of murder, truth, how some will never come
home, forever home. Things break apart,
but all the night up there aching to make us see.
You want us to see: leaves fall, gentle, like rain;
mist rises white through trees; wrens skip
in the weeds. It's late and dark, the only
glow for miles pulses of plane wings
across the clouds. I see now: heartbeats
of light against distance like infinity.

EDGE

The world has not yet fallen.

What else does this mean
but gratitude and the cold,
quiet buzz of anticipation?

Even if earth stretches
barren, blood snaking
in dirt, trees standing
as brass instruments,
distant and mute,

I brace my bones
and stick hope
between my teeth
like a blade of grass.

This world is often

no friend of mine
but looking up:
clouds puffed
with lavender
and below:
patches so green,
they're laughing
at the buried grief
beneath them.

I breathe in
the fact I live.
Another day, then,
to gather wild joys
in the sun.

Sarah Tate is a writer, editor, and teacher from the pine trees of Partlow, Virginia. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has been featured in *Solum Journal*, *Ekstasis*, *The Clayjar Review*, *Unbroken*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Scapes* was recently released by Bottlecap Press (2025).

POETRY

David Athey

SLITHERING, TWITCHING

In the tropical dead of day,
a grey squirrel with twitching tail
makes his rounds with gifts

for the community garden.
The squirrel keeps to the shadow side
and fills the soil with the usual thistle

seeds emptied from a lady's bird feeder.
It's rather funny
and if chatter is laughter

this squirrel's a jester,
seeding the garden with little jokes,
except today, in a strike of blurring light,

the squirrel left something new —
a snakeskin — as if to say
“well ain't that nice, ain't that nice!”

in this slithering, twitching,
slithering, twitching, slithering, twitching
paradise.

David Athey's poems and stories have appeared in various literary journals and magazines, including *Christianity & Literature*, *The Iowa Review*, *Dappled Things*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Windhover*, *Palm Beach Illustrated*, *Time of Singing*, and *Notre Dame Magazine*. Athey lives in Florida on a small lake with large iguanas. His books, including *Art is for The Artist*, are available at Amazon.

POETRY

Kimberly Beck

POCKET PRAYER

I carry it around with me
in a message on my phone, typed
and re-typed;
on the torn page of a leather journal, folded
in my pocket like a sleeping
crane, or a heron, or
a swan. Now and then it stretches
and lifts its wings, feathers brushing
over the tips of my fingers as I reach
for the ink, for the soft, snow-bright page.
I carry it in a memory,
I carry it in a night of despair,
in a desperate prayer,
in the promise of the sun
as it rises, at last, by some miracle,
every morning, again
and again, and again:
Great is Thy faithfulness.

MAN OF SORROWS

But what does it mean
when they call you
Man of Sorrows?

I search for answers in a
long, scarlet thread, which is sewn
so delicately through the leaves
as they fall around me, on paved
trails,
on puddles gathered at the feet
of arthritic maple trees,
on park benches and sidewalks
and the last green patches
of dew-swept grass.

I search for answers in the heron —
always the heron —
his blue cloak, his thin shoulders,
the way his silhouette sings
above the river
and the willow tree, the way he
is hidden, but only
if you are not looking for him.

Man of Sorrows,
I stand beside the river, and
I watch the ducks, as I always do,
admiring their dancing, the gloss
of their feathers flaring
in a show of northern lights
above the still, grey water.
And I imagine Your hands
are holding them up, all the way
from the bed of the river,
from the weight of the deep dark.

Kim is a poet from Washington State. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Solid Food Press*, *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Clayjar Review*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Amethyst Review*, and more. She is also the author of a poetry collection called *Chiaroscuro*.

POETRY

Jonathan Darren Garcia

AMOS, WHEN YOU ARE IN THE DESERT

I have stared into headlights,
And felt the car move through me —
like a phantom
I have fallen on the sharp branches of an oak tree —
swallowed splinters like food
I have felt the night kiss me goodbye —
woke with red eyes,
carrying the sky's golden, amber flames

Prayers, Prayers, Prayers —

I have felt my dreams fold
and have seen the face of eternity.
I have spoken to the darkness.
It tells me it misses the light.
Quiet your heart and see.
Amos, quiet your heart and see.
The air is alive with miracles
around you.

AMORIA WITH DOUBT

The sky hangs low — bleating
roots drink from the rain's dirty mouth
and reach for your feet

Minutes twist thin — unbreaking
Your teeth are claws in your mouth
you bite your lips
chew your nails
inhale air that gets lost
running towards the lungs

Your quiet tears — kept.
Answered by a silent angel
May you cross the bridge of dandelions
and sleep

and dream yourself small again —
Held,
blessed before you knew
what it meant to fall —

Jonathan Darren Garcia is a San Antonio-based writer and has been published in several literary magazines, including *From Whisper To Roars*, *Beyond the Veil*, *Voices Dela Luna*, *That Gray Zine*, etc. He is a current staff contributor for 2x award-winning *PEPPER* magazine. On his off time, he is drinking his favorite coffee and dreaming.

POETRY

Scott Schuleit

A PRECIOUS SOUL

standing at a busy corner in neon-glittered night,
red dress exposing skin, perfume wafting pleasure
to passerby. Half-lidded eyes tracing her shape,
some indifferent, a few soft, expressing pity, compassion.
Need some money for drugs and her babies, no other reason.
Dangers, fights for best places to work, violent customers.
No exits out of this room, she figured. Difficult to see
through thickening smoke, rising heat, greed of flame.
She saw no way out of the city.

Trembling, relieved, someone finally moving towards her,
shadow emerging from nearby darkness. Same business
or something else, face hard to read. Later, visiting her dealer,
going home, checking on children, heating ice in glass pipe,
breathing and breathing it in, used to poison. Bathing,
washing herself, scrubbing her flesh, never feeling clean,
never feeling fresh.

Scott Schuleit is a follower of God, a husband to his dear, lovely wife Christina, and the Associate Pastor at North Palm Baptist Church. His poems have appeared in various publications, including *Christianity & Literature*. He is the author of *A Pernicious Correspondence: Letters from a Devil* (Prevail Press, 2021).

POETRY

Patrick T. Reardon

HARSH ANGLES

Chill valley. Hallelujah waters.
Hear nobody. Hear nobody.

Outshout the light of God.
Outrun the word.
Outdistance.

Jordan troubles. Burden dreams.

Cross the kingdom into the Canaanite land.
Take by force.

Hear the unsaid.

Honor and humble. Steady the sun.
Glory the run. Son the light.
Soul the fire.

Light the line through.
Light the fall of fire.

Humble and honor, judge.

Jagged tribulations, hard times.

In the ground, the fox hides.
In the tree branch nest, the bird.

Go here. Go there.
This door and that.

Falling, failing, fading, rise no more.

The long little finger of the selfish.
The broken knuckle.

Babylon falling.

You'd better. You'd better.

Refuge the city. City the run.
Run. Run. Run.

Jonah the whale.
Isaiah the preachment.
Elijah the chariot across the hunted skies.

Shoulder bone, Samson,
the blindness.

You'd better.

One-Cent is awake in the gray-black:
his thoughts at harsh angles,
black-ember butterflies rising from flames.

He looks in the rock for the fissure of entrance.

Behold, the alley scripture.

Patrick T. Reardon, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter from 1976 to 2009, is the author of seven poetry collections. His latest is *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 (Lavender Ink). He is a five-time nominee in poetry for a Pushcart Prize. His poetry has appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *America*, *RHINO*, *Commonweal*, *After Hours*, *Autumn Sky*, *Burningword Literary Journal* and other journals. He is also the author of the history *The Loop: The "L" Tracks That Shaped and Saved Chicago*.

POETRY

Lucy Swan

THE -OLOGIES OF MEMORY

philosophers posit that the past only exists in the mind; settled in the spongy, gray-matter of your cerebrum, in fluid through the narrow tubules between synapses, budding in the engram cells of your neuronal ensembles. but i see it as an ugly discoloration clinging to the epidermis, a pink ghost of a scab, action's irreversible consequence. experts in dermatology say that the body's natural healing response to damage, the scar, is permanent; consistently there even when hidden, resists salve and all ointment, persistent despite all manners of prayer and bribery and repentance. but i expect that the second-advent Christ will peel it off, as easily as He might peel old paint from a wall, bark from a tree, a sticker from a banana

POETRY

Cody Adams

THUNDER PUT ASUNDER

When my ex-wife refused to halt
the affair

I reminded her of the time our preacher screeched
a sermon about God's answer to Job,
and how, with climactic timing that felt cinematic,
lightning struck in the city street just outside
the stained glass, animating illustrations of
Judgment Day for one terrifying instant.

"Don't you remember? The summer thunder jiggled our pale cheeks."

I said it because I loved her, sincerely. But I think she thinks

I hate her.

Cody Adams teaches literature in Toronto, Ontario. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Solum Literary Press*, *Cacti Fur*, *Defenestration*, among others. He also serves as a Board Member for Forefront Festival.

POETRY

Alexandria Marianne Leon

THE JAR STILL THERE

shifting the weight —
forearms tight,

handle slick from sun
water pulling low.

small fingers tug
at my pant leg.

the thought —
drop it.

My wrists loosening,
water leaning
the wrong way.

my grip tightens.
you come to mind.

When you walked to the well
at noon —
the jar held tight to your side,

sweat caught at the nape,
taste of salt —
thirst held back.

foot placed carefully;
sound carries.

When you reached the well,
the hollow waiting,
jar touching stone,
sound unanswered.

You saw —
He was already there.
Your breath stilled,
no place to look away.

He met your eyes,
unflinching.
He spoke what you carried
and did not leave.

You left the jar
resting on stone.

Did you laugh,
the sound strange
in your own mouth?

“Mama, I’m thirsty.”

I turn.
salt forming at my hairline.

the can still heavy,
handle warm

she runs ahead,
toward the shade.

I don’t follow yet.

My hands full,
careful not to spill —

your hands swinging
at your side.

I cross the yard,
looking for her plastic cup.

Alexandria Marianne Leon is a poet writing about motherhood, faith, embodiment, and inheritance. Her work has appeared in *The Reformed Journal*, *Radix*, *Parousia*, and *Foreshadow*. She lives in Oregon with her husband and two daughters.

POETRY

Alexis Leigh Ragan

HEARTPINE

After *The Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt, 1853

There is no handle here,
on the face of a door overgrown
with the after-rot of harvest
loss, where persimmons split
along the worn frame, ombre
abandon embellishing the hinge

that was sealed shut with such
severity, one might believe
the owner of the home lives
bent on keeping secrets
silent — in a forest that thinks
it's forgotten, not knowing
its own carver.

Yet this is who light has traveled
such a long distance to dine with,
standing like a solid pine outside
the late orchard porch — for who else
illuminates the wood if not the lamp?

A quiet knock resounds. Either silence
will answer, or a living response.

it only takes an open heart to turn
the inner latch and unlock.

ODE TO BELMONT SHORE

Not that I knew it would
become the sanctuary
of my surrender — at first,

the apartment of my true
departure, my own song nest.

Until a knocking on the old
inner oak of my soul —
an opening. Suddenly, hours

on knees. How you serenaded
me into safety upstairs,
behind the opaque brown
curtains, drew me to your

merciful heart. It was there I saw
my own melting on surrendered
floorboards, a student living
alone in Belmont Shore.

Through Spanish archways,
the room grew warm.
In our dining, I transformed.

Alexis Leigh is a deep-image poet fascinated by epiphanic shifts, convinced that art serves as a window of worship that leads humanity back to God's heart. She created the literary journal, *Vessels of Light*, to house literature that shines for Christ. She is currently completing her MFA in poetry at California State University Long Beach.

POETRY

Adam Burrell

LET IT BE SO

Do you come to me? Do you come to this trash heap playground?
You tread on the mud, kick past the dirty magazines and sit,
silent and unassuming, on that swing. I'm still hiding inside
this rusted, metal climbing dome next to the merry-go-round.
You shouldn't be here, plain and simple. It's a place for snotty kids
and maybe drug dealers after dark. It's a place for teenage makeout sessions,
for raccoons and garbage cans and broken bottles and old shoes — and me.
I've got my mile after chalky mile of hopscotch proofs to show
what can go together and what cannot — what must never be so.
But the words swing like a breeze across the sandbox to me
Let it be so now. Because you are a beloved son — right where you are.

LOOK AT THE BIRDS

I've been catching bluebirds out of the corner
of my eye — flitting from branch to branch,
eyeing me with curiosity or perhaps mockery.
My neighbor put up a flower box on his fence
where a tree used to be. It was taken out
four years ago, he explained, though its digital ghost
remains on Google Maps. I was taking in the bird's eye
view from my office the other day, which lately
has become a kind of monastic cell where I practice
ora et labora daily — pray and work. Cells die daily,
I'm told, and, without me lifting a finger, are regenerated

inside of my praying body. And so I hear that old
question of his resurface — as it does in the eyes of horses
or my husky *What, in God's name — literally*
in God's name — should I be worrying about?
If I'm hearing that bluebird, and that tree's sacred ghost
aright — nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing at all.

Adam Burrell is a working poet living in the Sacramento region of California. He is the author of *CALL and Other Poems*. His poems have appeared in various literary journals, including *Strong Verse*. Adam holds a Master of Arts in Creative Writing and is passionate about the nexus between spirit, word, and body that finds expression in poetry.

POETRY

Margaret Adams Birth

A RUSH OF ANGELS' WINGS

Flashes from the chrome on cars
passing by on the street outside —

easy enough to confuse
with a rush of angels' wings

releasing a little shaft of light
from the heavenly realm —

remind me that where the wheels
meet the asphalt, there's where

the world, and this life, is grounded,
earthly gravitational pull and mundane mechanics

turning rubber-covered rims round and round
as they transport passengers from point A to point B ...

even as cherubim and seraphim and a whole celestial host
invisibly fly by.

COMMUNION ANTHEM

In the midst of the congregation, my
soprano feels like a balloon floating
high into the air as my lungs expand, releasing
notes heavenward; incense rises
and mingles with our voices:
“look not on our sins,
but on the faith of your Church,
and grant us peace and unity”; unity, Lord —
tenor, alto, baritone, and more soprano surround
me, building a spiritual fortress that buffets us
all — and above it all, the golden tones
that I imagine joining with angels’ and
other believers’, our breath not
ours alone, but infused with
the Spirit to which we all belong.

Margaret Adams Birth has published a wide variety of writing throughout her career: literary, “sweet,” romance, fictional “confession,” and mystery short stories and novellas; short nonfiction; comic books; and, of course, poetry. Most recently, her poems have appeared in *Lothlorien Poetry Journal* (England), *Route 7 Review*, and *Red Fern Review*.

POETRY

Meg Freer

STILL HERE, WAITING

Fifty years ago, she yelled at the old vagrant
in London, *Put her down!* when he hoisted up
my sister in the Finchley Road pharmacy.
Now she yells at God, *Stop picking me up!*
after every infection, every hospital stay.
She doesn't want to remain on this earth.

She phones and says, *I'm still here.*

God doesn't listen to me.

I have to keep living this awful life.

I wish she didn't have so much pain
stacked on top of so many complaints
that seem to compound one another.

I wish she could remember
she used to believe that Earth sings
to us in spring green and sunshine,
that we are at heart Easter people,
people of hope and new life,
that ordinary living can be holy.

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 four poetry chapbooks and is Poetry Co-Editor for *Sunlight Press* and a Contributing Editor for *Traces Journal*.

POETRY

Jo Taylor

ENTRANCES AND EXITS

*You sweep people away like dreams that disappear.**They are like grass that springs up in the morning**— Psalm 90:5 (NLT)*

Two weeks into December we are
all coming and going in my brother's
house, Hospice nurses attending
to his needs, some family whispering
of days to come, others partaking
of a meal prepared by community and
church friends. Outside, a lone red bird
thuds against the plate-glass window,
and the day wears on like a controlled burn.
And then she is gone — the family's newest
member, the one so full of life, the one
who had organized the barn that morning,
had run with the hunting dogs during the day,
had teared at the bedside of her brother-in-law,
stroking his lifeless arm like the wind caressing
a feather. Gone — before we could ring 9-1-1.
Before we could say goodbye. Before we could
come to terms with the cardinal's thwacks
against the window pane.

Jo Taylor is a retired, 35-year English teacher from Georgia. In 2021, she published her first collection of poems, *Strange Fire*, and in 2024, she published her second book, *Come before Winter* (Kelsay Books). Connect with her on Facebook or at <https://www.jotaylorwrites.com/>.

FICTION

FICTION

Mirjana Villeneuve

BODY

It worked. I followed the forty-day program exactly, and it worked, just as they said. I could barely sleep last night for the anticipation of it. And sure enough — morning forty-one — I got up and my body stayed in bed.

Look at it now, lying there. If you've ever had an out-of-body experience, this is not the same. Even out-of-body, you are fundamentally still in your body. It's all a head thing. This is different — the real deal.

I think I expected to feel something about it. Elation, maybe. Triumph, joy. Relief. I was even prepared to experience grief. But I feel nothing; I'm not even numb. Just, absence.

My — its — eyes are still closed.

They don't tell you what to do once the program's worked. I don't know anyone else who's been successful. I know a bunch of girls who keep trying and giving up after day seven. Then this other girl who tried and got so sick that she was hospitalized. Now she's out and is more body than ever.

In the absence of any other instruction, I get ready for work like I normally would: feed the cat, make coffee, take a shower. The water doesn't warm me. As I grab my keys to leave, I look back at my body. It feels wrong somehow to leave it there in bed. I hesitate for a moment, then go back and fold it up — arms in, then in half, then in half again. It's conveniently

rearrangeable in ways it never was before. I slip it into my backpack and lock the door behind me.

I expect to feel lightheaded on the walk to the bus stop — shaky or clammy or anything at all. But I don't. There were so many side effects throughout the program. There were days that my head felt like it was splitting in two or my heart felt like it would shiver right out of my chest, blind and frantic as a moth. Near the end, anything that touched me left a bruise. I had bruises on my hips from my mattress. I didn't check if they were still there before I folded up my body and put it in my bag. I half want to swing my bag around and check right now, but there are other people at the bus stop, and I don't want them to see that, after all this work and dedication, I went and brought my body with me.

I compromise by circling my wrist with my forefinger and thumb. There is nothing there. This, at least, is satisfying.

When I get to the office, I'm half-disappointed half-relieved that I don't run into anyone on the way to my cubicle. I set my bag by my feet and turn on the computer. Its robot insides whir to life.

At lunch, as usual, I venture to the coffeemaker in the kitchenette. A few of my coworkers have congregated there, microwaving last night's lasagna, waiting for the kettle to boil, leaning on the counter and eating instant noodles from a cup. As I approach, they fall silent. I fill my mug, coffee splashing out onto the counter. I sense their eyes on me as I reach for the paper towel.

"You look different," says the guy from accounting. "Did you cut your hair?"

“Oh. No,” I laugh nervously. My gaze flicks to the woman eating noodles, HR rep, but she quickly looks away.

Then HR says, “What’s that sound?”

Accounting: “It sounds like ... crying? Could it be?”

And sure enough, a muffled sob is coming from somewhere in the office. This tingly feeling runs through me, like hair standing on end, but all the hairs are on the inside.

The receptionist, overhearing as she comes around the corner, quips: “Probably just a classic case of corporate malaise.”

They *hmm* and *mbm* in understanding. I have the sudden and urgent need to not be among them, so I slip unsteadily away.

I all but fall into my chair, splashing coffee onto myself. It doesn’t burn. It’s then that I notice the sound has become louder. In fact — *please, no* —

I unzip my bag just a little bit, and sure enough, the cry is coming from my own body.

I rezip the bag so quickly that a bit of my hair gets caught, brown threads sticking out from the plastic teeth.

I throw my jacket over the bag to muffle the sound. Marginally better.

I try to think for a moment, casting around in my swivelling desk chair for some inspiration or solution, but all it does is give my panic time to grow, and finally I grab my bag with my body in it and take the stairs two-by-two out into the courtyard.

A handful of people are eating their lunches at the picnic tables, enjoying the spring sunshine. My flurry of movement draws their attention, and their voices turn to whispers. My body, folded up and zipped away, has begun to weep. I break into a run.

Once I reach the sidewalk, I continue east, weaving in and around people with little regard for manners. I'm not sure where I'm headed until I step off the concrete onto the boardwalk and the ocean spreads out in front of me, an expanse of churlish water. Seagulls shriek and dive through the mist thrown up and scattered by the waves. It's so immense that, for a moment, I forget myself entirely.

But the weeping.

I take my body around to the side of the public bathroom and crouch between the shadow of the building and the dumpster. Here, hidden, I can unzip. I have to really work at it over the place where my hair is stuck, but finally my bag opens. I pull my body out partway until I can see the face. It's sticky with tears and snot, and splotchy red. Hideous and baby-like. I wipe the cheeks and nose, try to shush it. It doesn't let up, so I stuff the sleeve of my sweater into the mouth and grab my phone.

I have the agency's number saved in my contacts. After one ring, an automated voice answers. I click through a series of menu options, hoping I'm heading down the right rabbit hole. Eventually, they put me on hold, then a woman picks up.

"Hello, you've reached Aftercare, how can I help you?"

"Hi, I finished the program yesterday and it worked, I think, but my body is weeping."

“Ah. Yes. This happens sometimes when the program is not followed perfectly.”

“But I followed it perfectly!” My voice sounds desperate, childish.

“Mhm.” I can tell she doesn’t believe me. “Sometimes there are complications. The program doesn’t work the same for every body. There is no guarantee that it’ll take — you signed the waiver before you started. Do you have any allergies you didn’t list?”

“No!”

“Hmm.”

“When will it stop weeping?”

“In similar cases, there has been no cure for the weeping. The weeping is just a side effect that indicates the bodily evacuation was inchoate.”

I am silent, but for the weeping, which is not me, but my body.

“Is there anything else we can do for you?”

“I guess not,” I squeak, and before I can muster the energy or wherewithal to ask about warranty, she hangs up.

I scream in frustration, but the sound of it comes from my body’s mouth. In horror, I take the bag, still unzipped, by body half spilling out, and tear across the vacant boardwalk to the edge of the pier where I heave my body over the wooden railing and into the ocean.

The water seethes and shudders —

I am tossed under and upwards, whipped by the undertow, the ocean entering my body by every avenue — nose, eyes, mouth, there is ringing in my ears, my lungs aflame — the frigid Atlantic has solidified my muscles, seeped into my bones — before my vision, blurred, a hand —

I am wrenched from the water and carried to shore, where I am stretched out on the sand and shaking with my head on a lap. I am held as I gag and turn to the side to throw up all the contents of my stomach — salt water, digestive fluid, black coffee.

A cup is held to my lips; I don't have the wherewithal to refuse, even out of habit. A thick liquid runs into my mouth, over my teeth and tongue, and I swallow.

The being who took my body from the ocean kisses my cheek and a sharp pain stabs my forehead above my eye. A sticky trickle runs towards my eyebrow and down to my temple. I reach up to touch it and my fingers come away red. I turn towards my assailant and savior, but I am alone.

I lay back upon the sand and close my eyes.

They don't keep me in the hospital overnight. As soon as I can prove to them that I can walk on my own, they let me go. I take the bus home, grateful for the presence of strangers — the anonymity of a crowd, of bodies familiar in their unfamiliarity pressed together, everyone with the private security of somewhere to leave and somewhere to go. When I reach home, I shower and let the water warm me through to the bone. The floor of my tub is covered in sand. I avert my eyes from the bedroom mirror as

I pull on my pyjamas, tightening the drawstring around my bruised hips. The cat's warm body curls into the hollow of me and we fall asleep.

When I wake the next morning, every part of me aches. The face in my mirror looks the same as it always had — like some benign stranger, someone I should recognize. The only difference is the small red scab above my eye. I scratch at it but it won't come away.

On the dresser, I notice a stick no longer than a thumbnail — a thorn. The base where it has been broken from its vine is still damp and green.

I hold it up to the light. The tip is dark with blood.

Mirjana Villeneuve is a teacher and writer from Ontario, Canada. Her work can be found most recently in *Restoration*, *The Clayjar Review*, *Traces*, and on her Substack, *The Littlest Pilgrim*.

FICTION

Paul Michael Garrison

TASHA IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Tasha's face looked as though someone had stuffed a plum in it, right where her left eye should've been. She examined it in the bathroom mirror beneath the flickering tube light, the cracked tile still morning-cool beneath her bare feet. The room was so cramped she could hardly turn around without falling over the toilet or into the shower, but still she leaned precariously against the sink to get a closer look. Her fingertips glowed white against the purpled skin as they delicately traced the obscenity. Like a ripened fruit, the skin felt taut and, due to the humidity, had the same sense of succulence. If she opened the eye, would tears run out or juice? She could open it — though not all the way. Makeup wasn't going to cover it. She raked some of her brunette curls down over the side of her face. That could work if she didn't mind having cycloptic vision for the day. And looking somewhat emo, which at twenty-three she was a little too old for. A plosive sigh parted her lips, making a soft pop in the silence. She pulled her hair high onto her head and fastened it with a black band. She could figure out what to do after she sent Dale on his way.

She stole into the darkened bedroom, where Dale sprawled face-down on his half of the bed. The light green sheet rode up over the calf of one bare leg, and one arm dangled over the side, as if Dale's body were pouring into the shadows. Most visible in the dimness was the white expanse of his undershirt stretched tight across the broad back and shoulders, above which his head seemed merely a dark spot, a hole in the pillow.

Tasha closed the door to the kitchen, the third and only other room in their apartment, without disturbing Dale. He'd be up soon enough and needed all the rest he could get after last night and with the day he had ahead. He would need a good breakfast. She took milk, eggs, and bacon from the refrigerator.

She was wearing one of Dale's T's as a nightshirt, a faded navy blue washed to baby softness, the logo of some favorite band from his youth worn to a memory. He wasn't much taller than she was, but his frame was so squarelike, broad enough that his shirts hung off her curves enough to cover her behind. Wearing them around the apartment made her feel sexy and gave her a sense of belonging. A reminder that he was bigger and could protect her. She pulled the neckline over her nose and breathed in the blend of musk, cologne, and outdoors that was Dale. She would miss the smell of fresh-cut grass he had brought home with him all summer. When he came in the door, it always preceded the sourness of the sweat that drenched him from mowing lawns.

He had resorted to lawn work to cover the rent. They'd uprooted from their families in Pennsylvania the winter before and come south so that Dale could apprentice as a brick mason with his mother's cousin. The cousin had encouraged them, talking about a thriving local economy and a cheaper cost of living. He intimated that Dale could take over when he retired, never mentioning that he was already trying to sell the business. The apprenticeship lasted two months. The cousin scooted off to Florida, leaving Dale and Tasha stung and without connections or local references. In midwinter there was little seasonal employment, and the couple barely made do until spring. Even then Dale struggled, competing with illegals and teenagers for odd jobs, until the mowing picked up regularly. Tasha had finally gotten a job at a dollar store. But now Dale was done with catch-as-can jobs. Today he started on a construction crew, and there would be real money. Things would be different.

She placed the skillet on one of the stove eyes and laid down strips of bacon, which left her fingers slick. With her other hand, she turned the burner on medium. Tasha rubbed her fingers together, the grease like the South Carolina damp clinging to her skin. With more money, they could start running the air conditioner that perched awkwardly in the bedroom window, stealing their light without giving anything in return. She stopped the circular movement of her fingers. It would not rub away. She knew this, knew it required cleansing. She washed her hands in the sink and started the coffee. The bacon started to sizzle.

She was glad her parents could not see her now. And though she tried not to, she thought about what they would say, how disappointment would drag on their faces, how they would not understand, and how her daddy might just try to kill Dale. That was one dog fight she didn't want to see, the two men she loved the most beating the tar out of each other. Though Dale wouldn't hurt Daddy if he could help it.

She turned the bacon. The sizzle rising from the skillet became a steady white noise. She poured a glass of milk and set it and the aspirin bottle on the kitchen table, a ridiculous square of chrome-trimmed fake marble left by the previous tenant.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is ... Tasha couldn't remember all the things the preacher at their wedding had said love was. She decided to look up that list later. Love does not seek its own; that was another one. You had to learn those things, practice them. You couldn't be love all at once. She knew that much.

Tasha opened the silverware drawer and pulled out an arcane serving fork. It was a small awkward trident, its flat head an inch and a half across. The outer tines curved inward sporklike, but the long gaps between the tines

formed rectangles that slanted internally toward the stem. An impractical wedding gift. The giver, with ill-conceived good intentions, had their names and wedding date engraved along the stem, making it unsellable. What the fork was meant for, Tasha had no clue. She only knew what she used it for.

She slipped the fork's flat head between the skillet and the glowing eye.

She turned the bacon again. The grease sputtered and popped. She got down a plate, cup, and mug from the cabinet. Coffee dribbled into the pot, its sharp aroma mixing with the savory scent of the bacon. From the bedroom came the sound of shifting sheets and bedsprings. Dale emerged in his undershirt and briefs squinting against the light and groaning through his teeth. Tufts of his hair, bleached a golden brown from the sun, stuck out in odd directions. She turned away from him and poked at the bacon with the spatula before turning the strips a final time. She heard him fumble with the aspirin and gulp the milk. Then his bare feet made a fleshy sucking sound against the damp linoleum as he walked toward her.

As she moved the bacon to a paper towel laid over a plate, he wrapped his arms around her just below her breasts and, pulling her gently back against him, pressed a prickling kiss on her neck. The soft scratch of his stubble on her neck and the firm strength of his body and grasp made Tasha want to dissolve into him and cry and be carried back to bed.

Instead she said, "You're going to make me burn myself."

He loosened his grasp but still held her while she finished.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. Despite the milk, his breath still smelled yeasty and stagnant.

“You’d better clean up while I finish your breakfast.”

“I know I got rough last night. I remember that much.”

“You could say that.”

“Are you okay? Let me see.”

Tasha let him turn her around, his rough hand cradling her chin. When he saw the purple eye, his mouth fell slack and the color flickered beneath his tan. His expression touched and angered her at the same time.

“Did you put anything on it?” he asked, moving to the refrigerator.

“No. You need to get ready. You can’t be late on the first day.” She cracked an egg into the skillet.

“You shoulda put something on it.” He took a bag of peas from the freezer. “Here, let me put this on it.” As he crossed back to her, he spotted the silver handle protruding from under the skillet. He gave a single involuntary shake of his head and held the bag to her eye.

She tried to brush him aside but he persisted, so she stood there, back to the stove, and took his care.

“You know that wasn’t really me.”

“He looked a lot like you.”

“You know what I mean.”

She said nothing.

“Did I come home riled up?”

“Pretty much.”

“Me and Charlie went out to celebrate the job. I was just feeling so good about it, you know? I thought I’d just have a couple.”

The cold began to burn her face, and he let her push the bag away.

“I know what you were doing.” She cracked another egg into the skillet and flipped over the one already bubbling in the bacon grease.

“We were celebrating, so I didn’t think to stop. Once you get a couple down, you don’t think about it anymore.”

“If stopping is such a problem, maybe you should think about not starting.”

It was Dale’s turn to say nothing. A bruising silence because Tasha knew what words she wanted to come out of his mouth. Dale had always loved a bender. Back in Pennsylvania, the weekend always brought another round of him trying to drink their friends under the table. And no one minded because he was the most amiable of drunks or had been.

“I don’t understand why it’s different now.”

Tasha bit her lip, uninterested in having this conversation again.

Finally, Dale asked, “Do we have to do this now?”

She turned her face toward him. “And why not?”

“C’mon, Tash. It’s gonna be a long hot day, and I’m starting hung over.”

Something the color of her eye bubbled up inside her. She pointed to her face. “Last night wasn’t that all-fire convenient for me either. I got to go in to the store today. And looking like this.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m not asking for a pass. I’m just asking, can it wait?”

“Do you love me?”

His eyes couldn’t find their way from the floor. “You know I do.”

“Them’s just words.”

He took her by the shoulders and kissed her forehead. The soft of his lips and scratch of his chin called faintly to her.

“I never *want* to hurt you, you know that, right?”

She put her hands on his sides and felt the strength that slanted down to his waist. “And I never want to hurt you.”

He left the kitchen, and in a minute Tasha heard water running in the bathroom. She served out the eggs and bacon onto a plate, poured a mug of coffee, and set a place at the table. Dale came back in, his hair slicked dark and down. He wore his work boots and a belted pair of roughed-up, grass-stained jeans. A blue T-shirt hung over his bare shoulder, and he held a small white plastic case in one hand and work gloves stuffed in a ball cap in the other. He slid the case onto the table, dropped the gloves and hat on the floor, and sat in front of the plate. He looked at the empty side of the table.

“You not eating anything?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat,” he said. She ignored his comment because she clearly was not wasting away.

Dale pushed the plate and mug to the center of the table. “Let’s do it now.” He pulled the T-shirt into his lap, scooted up to the table, and gripped both sides of it.

From a drawer, Tasha pulled an old square hot pad, the ideal kitchen scene once pictured on it long worn away. She withdrew the fork from between the skillet and the burner and turned the stove off. She held the serving fork up before her in an almost ceremonial fashion as she walked the short L path to stand behind Dale.

Across the middle of his back below the shoulder blades, in a row, three scars shined palely against the tan skin. Without hesitation, Tasha pressed the serving fork against the skin at the end of the line. Its kiss hissed and gave off a trace of steam as Dale grunted and his muscles involuntarily contracted, causing the far table legs to rock away from and back to the floor. Tasha, for her part, grimaced and resisted the urge to pull the serving fork back immediately. Those few seconds sizzled as she waited. When she removed it, the fresh brand flamed, angry and hellish next to its mute brethren, long since healed and glinting pink in the overhead light, the pain of their reminder forgotten until this moment.

Her movements unhurried but deliberate, Tasha placed the fork in the sink, where it snapped at the spots of standing water. She went to the

freezer and retrieved the bag of frozen peas. Dale let go of the table with his right hand and held it up to stop her.

“Wait.” A single pinched word.

She did but only a second. “There’s no need to make it worse than it needs to be.” She held the bag against his back with the same insistent gentleness he had shown with her eye. The sudden cold made him suck in air between his teeth. Tasha laid her other hand on his shoulder and kissed his neck.

“You’d better start on that breakfast.”

Dale pulled the plate back to him and mechanically shoveled the eggs into his mouth. As he ate, Tasha took gauze and medical tape from the plastic case and bandaged the brand. The dressing would likely not stand up under the toil and heat Dale would face that day, but this was what they had.

A horn beeped outside.

“That’s Charlie,” Dale said. He stood up and pulled on his shirt. Tasha eased the back of it down so it would not snag the bandage. He turned around and held her face in his hands.

“You know I love you.”

“I know.”

He wrapped her in a hug and kissed her gently on the mouth. Her arms encircled his waist. He kissed her again, more strongly, and the hug became a clench.

“I wish I could stay home and take care of you.”

“I’m not even going to be here.” She jostled his waist. “So get out there and take care of me that way.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Charlie beeped the horn again. Dale grabbed his gloves and a last piece of bacon. A peck on the cheek and he was gone.

Tasha put the dishes in the sink. She opened the refrigerator and took out the only six-pack inside. She opened the first bottle and drank half, then poured the rest down the kitchen drain. Bottle after bottle followed it. She pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms and poured herself a cup of coffee. She put the bottles back in the carton and took them out to the trash, carrying her mug in the other hand. Dale would not be mad, or if he was he wouldn’t show it.

Their apartment was on the back end of an old house, and when Tasha walked out onto the peeling porch, she saw mostly trees and weeds pressing up against a chainlink fence. A bit of breeze stirred the humidity, making it less stuffy than the house. Here she sipped her coffee, knowing it was unlikely a neighbor would bother her, unless the old man above them made his clattery descent on the outside stairs. She would get a question or two at the dollar store from at least one of the girls. One time she had told them, “You should see the other guy.” They thought she was deflecting, didn’t realize she meant it. She could tell what they thought of Dale, the ones that cared enough to think, and she hated it. They didn’t know a thing about either of them.

She drew from her pants pocket a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She'd given up smoking a while back when she thought she was pregnant, a false alarm. Now she smoked only on these mornings or a night like last night. She sent a stream of whitish gray smoke toward the bluing sky. The dog days were gone, but it was still so light, so early. Autumn would come nipping soon. Dale loved Tasha. Tasha loved Dale. And Dale loved a bender. Tasha watched the sky with its late low moon and wondered which love, like the gray above her yielding to blue, would give out first.

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FICTION

Kyler Littlejohn

FOR THOSE WHO WEEP

Mama says the world's a crooked thing, and the tree down by the creek just learned to grow with it. It sits at the edge of Cinder Hollow, bent over the water like it's tired of keeping its head up. Folks say its roots reach straight into Hell, and maybe that's true. Nothing green ever grows around it, just the same brittle grass that dies every summer before it has the nerve to bloom.

When I was a child, I thought it was just a tree. Granddad said otherwise.

"That tree remembers," he'd rasp. "Every limb's got a ghost hanging off it. The kind that asked for too much bread or too much fairness."

Then he'd spit into the dirt like he was trying to rid his mouth of the taste of the world.

"Folks in this town think God likes things quiet," he said once. "Think He likes things stayin' the way they've always been."

He leaned back in his chair and pointed a crooked finger toward the creek.

"But the Good Book's full of people who wouldn't leave the world alone. Take old Jeremiah. That man spent his whole life shoutin' and weepin' cause things weren't right. Didn't matter that nobody listened. Didn't matter that they called him crazy. Some souls are born with that same trouble in 'em. They see the world the way it is, and they refuse it."

Mama would hush him. "Don't fill her head with talk like that," she'd say. "Work's the only honest thing left."

Mama's hands stayed red and cracked from scrubbing other folks' laundry, and her eyes always looked like she was waiting for something better that never came.

The summer after Granddad died, I started spending time near the creek. The air there was heavy, but quiet like the world had forgotten to breathe.

That's where I met her.

She came walking out of the trees one afternoon, her dress torn at the hem, her hair wild like she'd cut it herself. Said her name was Ruth Harper. She was maybe nineteen, just a few years older than me, but she carried herself like someone who'd already seen the end of everything.

"Didn't mean to scare you," she said, smiling slow. "I'm lookin' for work."

I told her there wasn't much of that around here.

"Then maybe I'll make some," she said.

She followed me home, and Mama, though wary, gave her a plate of cornbread and beans. Ruth thanked her proper, then asked if she could sleep in the shed for a spell. Mama didn't like it but said yes, she always did when pity outweighed fear.

Ruth worked hard. Harder than most men I'd seen. She mended fences, gathered kindling, and fixed the washboard Mama said was beyond saving. But it was the way she looked at things that unsettled me, like the world was a secret she'd already read the ending to. She carried a small, leather Bible everywhere she went. Kept it in her apron pocket, bound in a strip of worn twine. I saw her open it once when she thought I wasn't looking. The margins were filled edge-to-edge with her handwriting.

Notes in pencil, scratched prayers, questions that read more like arguments. She wasn't just reading from God; she was writing to Him.

Later I asked what she wrote in there.

She said, "Truths no one else'll listen to." Then she smiled, soft and strange. "Figure the Lord is busy with the prayers of others, so I'll just write it down here so He can read it later."

Ruth asked questions no one else asked.

"Why's that tree still standin', Eliza?"

"'Cause it's old," I said.

She shook her head. "No. It's standin' 'cause they need it to. 'Cause every time somebody looks at it, they remember what happens to folks who forget their place. They say work makes you honest. But honest don't feed you, does it?"

I didn't answer.

The next time I saw Ruth, she was staring at the tree; it was twilight. The air had gone lavender, and lightning bugs blinked around her like ghosts trying to warn her off.

"I could burn it," she said softly. "One good night of wind and kerosene."

Her voice was steady.

"You'd get killed for that," I whispered.

She smiled. "Maybe. But it'd die first."

That night, I couldn't sleep. The air was thick and restless, the kind that makes dogs whine and screen doors tremble. Out my window, I saw the faint glow of a lantern heading toward the creek. I told myself to stay put. But I had to know if Ruth meant what she said.

When I reached the edge of the clearing, the air already smelled of oil and smoke. Ruth stood before the hanging tree, her dress ghost-white in the moonlight, a tin can of kerosene swinging at her side.

She struck a match against her Bible's spine and touched the flame to the bark. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the fire caught, climbing slow and hungry, orange tongues licking the noose scars.

The flames reflected in her eyes.

The tree groaned like it remembered everything. Sap hissed. Smoke curled low and black. I wanted to run to her, to stop her, but my legs wouldn't move. Then the wind shifted, and in a rush of sparks, she was gone. Whether she ran or burned, I never knew. By morning, all that was left was a black stump and a smell that clung to your skin like sin.

I used to think Ruth Harper was gone. But now I wonder if the world ever lets a soul like hers leave for good. Because last night, I found her Bible half-buried by the creek. The pages were soaked, the ink smeared, but one line was still clear:

“Lord, if the meek shall inherit the earth, then let me make it worth inheriting.”

I stood there a long time listening to the water move over the rocks. Granddad used to say the prophet Jeremiah cried because people refused to hear the truth, even when it was shouted in the streets. Standing there with Ruth's Bible in my hands, I started to wonder if maybe the Lord still

sends folks like that now and then. The kind who see the world as it is and refuse it.

FICTION

Chelsea Barnwell

THROUGH THE HEDGE

The hedge formed a nearly complete barrier around Bridget's quarter-acre lot. Vines and weeds had taken root in its shade and grown up through the thorny branches, completing its ten-foot privacy screen. The only break in the hedge was the gap where a brick path ran from the street sidewalk to the front porch. The gap was so narrow and the hedge so thick, Bridget had to face the gap square on to see anything on the other side.

Bridget knew the people talking on the other side of the hedge couldn't see her as she poured birdseed into a feeder.

"They're doing a lot of work on that house," one voice said.

The other replied, "Isn't that great. Hopefully more of the houses on the street will get some attention soon." The people laughed and their footsteps softened as they left the paved sidewalk for the grass, out of reach of the encroaching hedge, then became distinct again as they returned to the sidewalk once they were past Bridget's lot.

Bridget knew the house they thought needed attention was hers. She also knew the house with the work going on was directly across the street, the Roberts' old house. The Roberts had lived in the neighborhood even longer than Bridget had. Bill Roberts had been gone fifteen years, and Carol followed him two years ago. Bridget wasn't sure which made her feel more unsettled, knowing the house across the street was empty ... or

knowing it was full of people who didn't even remember Carol, let alone Bill. A young family had bought it from the Roberts' granddaughter, though Bridget hadn't seen much of them yet. She had seen plenty of work trucks and people going in and out, though. In the last few months, they had replaced the roof and the windows and cut down many of the old trees and bushes. Contractors had come to replace rotting spots in the eaves and window frames, and someone else had come to paint them. Power tools always seemed to be running inside, and there was a dumpster in the driveway, which was filling up with shag carpet, mint green bathroom fixtures and tiles, old pieces of furniture, and disintegrating cardboard boxes of things that had not been worth the while for the granddaughter.

If Bridget came out her front door or stood on the brick sidewalk, she had a narrow view of the house. The new family had painted the front door yellow. The Roberts' door has always been colonial blue.

Those young folks must want everything to be new. Well, perhaps Bridget had in her day too, but the tools made a lot of noise, the contractors brought a lot of big vehicles down the narrow street, and seeing a kitchen table in the dumpster is hard when she had spent so many mornings there with an old friend. She wished the work would finish soon so things would quiet down.

One morning, Bridget went out her back kitchen door as usual, walking slowly as she made a circuit of the yard, carrying a bag of bird seed to fill the various feeders hanging from trees and sprinkling extra on the stumps and in the grass. When finished, she stopped for a little break at her kitchen table. When she was ready, she went out the front door with the

fish food for the Koi pond and an empty watering can. After taking care of the fish, she filled the watering can from the spigot for the bird bath.

As she reached the bird bath, she drew her breath in sharply and her hand faltered. She clumsily set the watering can down in the bird bath, eyes fixed on something in the gap in the hedge. It was a boy. Next to the massive hedge, he looked very small, though probably old enough to be in school. He had short brown hair flipped up in the front above his forehead. His wide brown eyes and big ears reminded her of an elf.

“What do you want?” Bridget asked sharply. *Ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-ba-bum.* She clutched at her chest, willing her heart to still.

He answered, “I wanted to see why there aren’t any squirrels in our yard, but a whole bunch were coming over here.”

Bridget smiled and straightened her back a little. “Well, you can see.” She gestured to her generous distribution of bird seed. “If you feed something, it will come.”

The little boy nodded, “Yep. I’ll have to ask my mom to do that so we can have some animals at our house too.”

Bridget picked up the watering can again and filled the bird bath with water. The boy was still standing there. “Well, what do you want?” she asked.

“Mom says I can’t go into your yard unless you give me permission. You can have permission to come into our yard if you want.”

Bridget looked around her yard at the rusting wrought-iron patio furniture (which had never been used for sitting), the massive old-growth trees and bushes, the porch filled up with boxes and odds and ends, and the Koi pond. She shrugged her shoulders, “Well, you can come in if you want, but I don’t know that there is much for you to do here.”

The boy came through the hedge and began to wander all over the yard. He watched the birds fighting for seeds and squirrels chasing each other from the trees to the roofline and back. He squatted by the pond. Bridget wondered if she’d get in trouble with the insurance if he fell in. “Careful by the water,” she said. He seemed old enough not to drown in a foot of water, but she wasn’t sure. He looked up at her, arms wrapped around his knees, hands on his sneakers. He nodded and then looked back at the fish.

Bridget’s back was getting a little tired. She usually went inside about now and sat down to a crossword puzzle book until *The Price Is Right* came on at 10 a.m. She didn’t think she could just leave the boy though. She went nearer and stood with her hand against a tree.

He pointed. “That frog is really big. See him?”

“Yes.” After a minute’s quiet, Bridget asked, “What’s your name?”

“Leo,” he said.

“I’m Bridget.”

Leo looked up at her quickly, eyebrows furrowed a little and head tilted to the side. “Oh, I don’t think I’m supposed to call you that. I’m supposed to call you Mrs. Something-or-other.”

Bridget laughed a little, “Well, Mrs. Williams then.”

He looked reassured, “Ok. Do you ever get any snakes in this pond, Mrs. Williams?”

“Well, goodness, I hope not! Can’t say that I’ve seen any snakes in there before.”

He looked disappointed.

“I sometimes see ground snakes, though, in the yard.”

He smiled. “What kinds?”

“Oh, black snakes mostly.”

He seemed disappointed again. “Those aren’t the poisonous kind.”

“Gracious, no! Don’t go messing around with snakes now, of any kind!”

Her back was really hurting now. “Does your mother know you’re over here?”

“Uh huh, I think so.”

“Well, you better go back so she doesn’t worry about you.”

He took one last look at the frog and touched it with his finger. When it jumped in the pond, he also jumped up and said, “Bye, Mrs. Williams.” He ran out through the gap in the hedge, and she went in to do her crossword puzzle.

The next day, while eating a bowl of soup in the late afternoon, Bridget realized she was disappointed that Leo hadn't come back. She had looked for him each time she passed by a window, and she'd lingered a little bit longer outside than usual. Maybe she had scared him. Maybe his mother had been worried about him and told him not to play in neighbors' yards where she couldn't see him. Maybe he'd discovered a nest of snakes in his yard that was more interesting than her frog. She told herself it didn't really matter. She made sure she took her medications and recorded that she'd taken them, so she didn't forget and take them twice accidentally. That was her great fear. Well, one of her great fears.

The following day, Bridget made cookies. It had been a long time since she had made cookies. She carefully scrubbed her hands and all the utensils before starting and made sure they were cooked thoroughly, but still tasty. Later, while she performed her usual routine of outdoor chores, she kept looking toward the gap in the hedge. When she was done, she settled into a spot on the front porch where she could see down the brick path, through the gap in the hedge, and across to the Roberts' place. Well, Leo's place. She had the cookies covered with plastic on the table beside her. She picked up her crossword puzzle and tried to focus on it.

Finally, when Bridget was almost at the point of going back inside because her program would be on soon, Leo and another little boy came out of the yellow door. Bridget smiled a little and sat up. Could he see her in the shade of the porch? She waved a hand. He saw her. He said something to the other little boy and they both walked across the street.

"Hi, Leo. Who is this?"

"Hi, Mrs. Williams. This is my brother, Alex." Alex had the same hair as Leo, but his eyes were blue and he was a little shorter.

“Hi, Alex. Would you two like some cookies? I made them this morning.”

Both grinned and nodded. She pulled back the plastic and then noticed their dirty hands as they reached for the cookies. She’d forgotten how boys played.

“Oh, perhaps you better wash your hands first.”

Leo looked down at his hands and rubbed them on his pants. Alex followed suit. Leo said, “I think it’s all right. We normally just wash hands and pray before eating a meal, not snacks.”

Each of the boys grabbed a cookie and munched. Leo asked, “Can I show Alex the pond and see if the frog is there?”

“Sure, you can.” Bridget got up out of her chair and slowly followed them down the steps.

While Leo’s eyes seemed to absorb everything in one still gaze, Alex’s eyes bounced around to everything, just like Alex himself. He was on one side of the pond, then the other, climbing around behind the filter, stirring his finger in the water, halfway climbing a tree before sliding back down. Alex moved a broken flowerpot that was lying on its side. “Ouch!” He cried.

Ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-ba-bum, ba-ba-bum, ba-bum. Bridget quickly walked over, “What, what is it?”

“It bit me!”

Bridget’s mind raced through biting things: Black Widow spiders, copperheads, rabid raccoons. She looked around and noticed the wasp nest clinging to the inside of the broken pot. Her heartbeat settled a little,

only to rise again. “It wasn’t a bite. It was a sting. Are you allergic to bees?” She pulled him away from the spot and held another thin arm out to block Leo, who was coming over to see the wasp nest better.

Alex was holding one hand with the other, shaking it and saying “ouch.” He moved his hand to put the finger in his mouth, but Bridget intercepted with a wiry grip. “Not in your mouth! Leo, is Alex allergic to bees?”

Leo shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“Ok. Well, we’re going right over to check with your mother. Come on.” Bridget held each one of them by the hand as they crossed the street, halting at the curb even though the street was quiet before proceeding across. Leo pulled slightly away from her and muttered an embarrassed, “I know to look both ways.”

Leo and Alex’s mother assured Bridget that neither Alex nor Leo was allergic to bees, but she appreciated her help and, yes, she did think washing hands before snack was a good idea. In the following days, Leo was often over at Bridget’s house. He discovered a turtle, a bird nest, snail shells, and sticky pinecones. Alex sometimes came too. Alex discovered new ways to frighten Bridget. Once, when she told him not to hang over the porch rail without feet or hands, he walked over to where she sat, put both his hands on her face, and almost touched his nose to hers so that all she could see were his blue eyes. He said, “Don’t worry, Mrs. Williams. I’m very careful!”

Bridget kept herself busy. She still had to keep track of all her medications, and she had nearly filled her crossword puzzle book and needed to buy a new one. She started to put a few treats on her grocery list, cheese crackers or extra veggies to cut into sticks with ranch dressing, just in case the boys were over.

She even went into the baby's room. The hinges groaned to remind her how long it had been. She thought maybe there would be some toy in there that she could offer to Alex or Leo. Maybe there was a ball or game or something.

As she looked in the closet and drawers, she coughed slightly as dust clouds rose. She was sad to see that nothing looked very happy or the kind of thing you'd give a child now. The toys made of metal were a little rusty, the plastic ones looked so fragile they'd snap in a minute, and the cloth was faded and dirty. They wouldn't want any of this.

She carefully put each item back. Before she left the room, she laid her hand on the little hollow in the bed. The quilt was sun-faded and soft. She looked at her own hand. It didn't seem right there, now that it was old and had age spots and blue veins. Many years ago, she used to come every night and lay her hand here. It had always seemed natural before. How long had it been?

Had she come since Earl left? Left because he'd gotten tired of her fretting. The doctor said there was nothing she could have done for the baby. Earl had believed the doctor, but Bridget could never quite believe that it hadn't been her fault, and she wasn't going to take risks again. That's what had made Earl upset, "You're trying to cheat death with all your pill counting and deep cleaning and news bulletins. You're killing me in the process!"

Bridget drew back her hand from the hollow in the bed and wiped a tear from her cheek. Earl's sister had called to tell Bridget when he passed about six years ago. They were still married so she went to the funeral and received the remainder of his estate in due time. She wondered if he'd have lived longer if he had not left and they hadn't had the hard business of

growing old alone. But maybe he'd been right. Maybe she'd been killing him. Maybe he thought himself lucky to have died on his own without her help.

One morning, there was a lot of commotion in the neighborhood. A church up the hill on the main road was having some kind of festival and bake sale. People were looking for parking on all the side streets. They were lined up all the way along both sides of Bridget's street, and more kept coming.

Bridget was happy to see the boys again. She felt a little more tired today and mostly watched them play from the porch until Leo said, "Mrs. Williams, do you want to come see the tree house our dad is building? It's really nice. I can see all sorts of animals from up there." Bridget said she'd come to see it. She got up from the porch and the three of them walked through the gap in the hedge, first the boys, then Bridget.

Bridget heard the car coming from the bottom of the hill, picking up speed to get to the main road. She took Alex's hand and was reaching for Leo's when Leo said, "Look! A turtle!" With a sudden spurt, he ran between the parked cars halfway into the street, bending down to pick up the box turtle.

"Noo!" Bridget let go of Alex's hand and, as quickly as she could, followed and pushed Leo out of the way as she heard the car braking. She tripped as she pushed him, and her thin knees hit the pavement as the car came to a stop a few feet away.

Bridget felt like she was underwater. The main sound in her ears was *Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba*. In the background, car doors opened and closed.

People were shouting and running from far away. Someone was on the phone. The air smelled of rubber. The pavement felt like needles in her hands and legs. She raised her head to see Leo had turned back to face her. His face was white and his mouth open. He suddenly made a gasping noise and began crying, tears dripping onto the shell of the box turtle, which had tucked itself safe away. From behind, she felt a little head lying on her back and arms hugging her shoulders. Alex said in her ear, “Don’t worry, Mrs. Williams.”

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba. Her heart had never beat so fast, and yet, it beat steady. Leo’s mother was now kneeling in front of her, asking her questions. She was alive, really alive. She was slowly raised to a standing position, but her legs shook so that she could not take a step. She was carried so that she could sit on the grass in Leo’s yard. Where she sat, she was looking back through the narrow gap in the hedge back into her own yard, up the little brick path to the deep porch and green door. It was the door Earl had carried her through as a bride. It was the door she had carried the baby through to welcome him home. But it looked different from here for some reason. Unbidden, tears began to stream down her face.

Chelsea Barnwell is a writer, deep thinker, and avid reader. She finds joy in serving her community alongside gospel-minded followers of Jesus. The front porch is the most used room in her house. You can read more of her work on her blog welcometothecarriagehouse.com.

FICTION

Jack Denning

LISTEN

He awoke suddenly in a strange room. But “awoke” is a misleading term; he just came to his senses, realizing that he had been lying there, with his eyes wide open, for a while. He had no idea how long that was, what he was doing here, or where “here” was. There was no sound.

How did I get here? he thought. The last thing he remembered was going to bed last night. He tried to turn his head and couldn't. There weren't any restrictions — at least he couldn't *feel* any — but he simply was unable to move his head. The fact alarmed him, so he tried to move his head with his hands to see whether there was something restricting his movements or not. This attempt did not even get off the ground, as he quickly discovered he couldn't move his hands either.

His alarm level increased greatly at this point, and he tried to move any and every part of his body. Nothing worked. He was just lying there, staring at the ceiling, unable to look away. He tried to close his eyes, and found he wasn't even capable of that. He wasn't blinking. He was completely immobile. There was no sound.

As alarm transitioned to fear, he realized that something was missing. Analyzing himself, he found that he wasn't experiencing the bodily reactions that accompany fear. He should be hyperventilating. But he wasn't hyperventilating for the simple reason that he wasn't *breathing*. His eyes would have gotten wider at this if they could have, but they didn't.

Am I dead? he thought. His brain still seemed to be working. But how could he be alive if he wasn't breathing? He tried to force some air out of his lungs, to force himself to make some kind of noise, but nothing

happened. And he realized that, as terrified as he was by his paralysis, he was even more terrified by the complete absence of any sound. He couldn't hear, or even feel, his heart beating. In such an utter silence as this, he should have been able to; it should have been very obvious in fact. But it wasn't. He wasn't breathing and his heart wasn't beating and he couldn't make any noise to end this fast from all sound that had somehow been forced upon him.

He panicked and would have thrashed his body had he been able. It was like being a claustrophobic in an enclosed space. But nothing made any difference. If he could just *hear* something, he would be all right. It would be a balm on his psyche. But there was nothing to hear. Just the featureless ceiling to look at, endlessly, for all eternity as far as he knew. He would have wept if he could.

Then the noise stopped.

A sense of horror enveloped him. There *had* been a noise, all that time, there had been a sound. But he hadn't noticed it because it had just been there in the background. He had been desperate to hear any kind of noise, and there had been one all along. He had been a blind man dying of thirst while surrounded by unseen water. And now, now, he was totally without any kind of sound. He wanted to scream, Bring it back! Bring back the noise! I'll do anything, just let me *hear* something!

Then the second noise stopped.

He would have cried out if he could. There had been *another* noise, but in his desperation brought on by the loss of the first, he hadn't noticed it either. But then ... that might mean that there was a *third* noise going on right now. If he just listened, he might be able to hear it.

He strained desperately, trying to hear whatever sound might still be there. But he couldn't hear anything. And yet he hadn't heard anything before when there were two sounds. If the sound is just always there, how can you notice it? It was like the music of the spheres. Some ancient and medieval natural philosophers claimed that the heavens made music, but

others asked, if that were the case, why can we not hear it? The answer was that the noise was always there, so we weren't aware of it. But if it *stopped*, then we would; and it would be cataclysmic. It would be like someone who never noticed that he was breathing, suddenly being placed in a vacuum.

He thought he was going insane. He didn't care what it was, he just wanted to hear *something*. *Anything*.

Anyone.

And then he heard a voice. It wasn't a sound, though; he just heard a voice in his mind that he was very familiar with but had never noticed before. It had been there with him his whole life, but never imposing itself on him. Just waiting for him to be open or desperate or crazy enough (or all three) to hear it. It said something very brief and to the point: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

"Yes, can I help you?"

"Yeah, I heard that you guys were doing an experiment, some kind of psychological experiment. And that you would pay \$500 for an afternoon?"

"Yes, that's right. We're testing people's responses to paralysis and silence. We'll give you something that will cause a complete paralysis of your muscles and most of your bodily organs — not the brain, of course — and put you in a soundproof room. We'll also give you a drug which causes temporary short-term memory loss, so you won't remember signing up for the experiment."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the drug will erase your memory for about twelve hours, so the last thing you'll remember is going to sleep last night. But as I say, it's

temporary. Your memory will come back completely within about one week. You hadn't heard about this before today, had you?"

"No, I just saw the flyer in the history building. About fifteen minutes ago."

"OK, good. If you had, you might be able to figure out what's happened to you, and we need you to be completely disoriented."

"And paralyzing most of my bodily organs? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Oh no. I'm sure it sounds like it, but with contemporary drugs and medical technology, there is virtually no physical danger to you. They wouldn't allow us to do this test otherwise. What we'll do is run your blood through a heart-lung machine that will oxygenate your blood and circulate it in place of your lungs and heart. The machine will actually be in another room so you can't hear it; your blood will be brought to it and back to you through tubes. Again, I know it sounds dangerous, but it really is no problem."

"Right."

"No, really. We have several medical techs you can talk to you if you want to verify it."

"Well ... are there any side effects? I mean, what's happened to the people who've done this already?"

"They've had no medical problems."

"OK, any other kinds of problems?"

"No, no. It's not a *pleasant* experience, of course. Most people are a little shell-shocked for a week, but it seems to fade as their memory returns."

"That's it?"

“Mostly. The only really odd thing is that many people come out of the experiment believing in God. But we expect that will fade along with everything else.”

Jack Denning is a teacher in Portlandia, where he lives with his family and his piano.

FICTION

Leah Johnston

A FLAX FLOWER

You took root so eagerly. Just a seed, so little, so frail. But you latched into the soil with such confidence.

Then you grew. You were pulsing with promise. You were entirely alive. If someone had bent close enough to the ground, hands and knees pressed to the grass, ear turned to the earth, they could have heard you singing, singing with expectation in every note.

Your shell opened, and your tiny head pressed upward towards the sky. You broke through your blanket into the open air. Five blue petals and a slender stem. You were vivid. You were delicate. The morning sun beamed across the world, and you lifted your face up to the light. But you were drooping by night.

Wilting, you vanished in what seemed an instant. No one ever saw you. No one even had the chance to. You were gone like a breath. You won't ever prompt a smile on the face of a passerby. You will never grace the table of a family or brighten a florist's display.

But oh what a beautiful life you lived to exist only and ever for the One who made you. What a pure purpose, the whole of your life meant solely for His delight, the whole of your being meant solely for His glory.

You were like the baby, so small and still, that we wrapped in strips of linen and laid inside a box — the box we carried across the field and buried in a flower patch beneath the rocks.

Leah Johnston delights in capturing beauty through various forms of art, including music, painting, photography, and writing. Her work has been featured in *Pure in Heart Stories* and *Wandering Lights Literary Magazine*. She is currently attempting to finish every C.S. Lewis book before her graduation in 2027.

FICTION

Atif Nawaz

THE WEIGHT OF SMALL STONES

Every evening, Elias carried a stone home.

He never chose them deliberately. They appeared in his pockets the way regret appears — quietly, without announcement. A smooth grey pebble after he lied to a customer. A jagged one after he ignored the old woman asking for help with her groceries. Once, after turning away his brother at the door, he found both pockets heavy with something that bruised his thighs when he walked.

At first, he laughed it off.

“Stones are nothing,” he said aloud, tossing them into a wooden box beneath his bed.

But the box began to fill.

And the stones did not remain ordinary.

Some pulsed faintly in the dark. Some whispered — not words exactly, but impressions. A tightening in the chest. A memory replayed with sharper edges. A voice he did not want to recognize as his own.

Weeks passed. Then months.

Elias noticed he had begun to walk differently, as if bracing for weight even when his pockets were empty. He avoided mirrors. They seemed to hold him a second too long, as though waiting for him to admit something.

One night, unable to sleep, he opened the box.

The stones had arranged themselves.

Not randomly — but in a careful, terrible order. A path, perhaps. Or a record. The smallest ones clustered near the edges. The largest at the center, where a dark, almost black stone sat like a heart.

He reached for it.

The moment his fingers brushed its surface, the room shifted.

He was no longer in his house.

He stood instead in a vast, dim place — something like a valley, though no sky could be seen. The ground beneath him was covered in stones, countless, stretching farther than sight allowed.

“They are yours.”

The voice came from behind him.

Elias turned.

An old man stood there — not frail, but worn in a way that suggested endurance rather than weakness. His eyes held both sorrow and a strange, unwavering kindness.

“I didn’t mean —” Elias began.

“No one does,” the man replied gently.

Elias looked down at the endless field. “What am I supposed to do with them?”

The man did not answer immediately. Instead, he stepped forward and picked up one of the stones. It was small — barely noticeable.

“Carry it,” he said.

“I already have.”

“No,” the man said, placing it back into Elias’s hand. “Not like that. Carry it where it can be seen.”

Elias hesitated. “Why?”

“Because hidden weight grows heavier. Seen weight can be lifted.”

Elias swallowed. “By who?”

The man’s gaze softened, and for a moment, it seemed as though light — faint but undeniable — pressed in from somewhere unseen.

“Not by you.”

Something in Elias broke then — not loudly, not dramatically, but like a thread finally giving way after being pulled too tight for too long.

“I can’t carry all of this,” he said.

“I know.”

The words were not condemnation. They were relief.

The man reached out — not to take the stones, but to steady Elias as his knees gave way.

“Then let them go.”

Elias closed his eyes.

For the first time, he did not try to hide the weight, or justify it, or rearrange it into something smaller than it was. He simply let it be what it was — and admitted he could not bear it.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back in his room.

The box beneath his bed was empty.

His pockets were empty.

Morning light slipped through the window — not harsh, not blinding, but steady. Certain.

Elias stood there for a long time, unsure of what had changed, only that something had.

Then, quietly, he stepped outside — lighter than he remembered being — and walked toward the day as if it might finally be possible to begin again.

Atif Nawaz is a Pakistan-based writer with a degree in English Literature. His work explores themes of identity, morality, and the unseen dimensions of human experience, often blending realism with subtle philosophical and symbolic elements. He is particularly interested in stories that examine loss, redemption, and the quiet resilience of the human spirit.

FICTION

Jacob W. Surface

TO AVOID AN AWKWARD FAMILY BREAKFAST,
I ESCAPE TO MASS FOR THE FIRST TIME AT
ST. MARY OF THE ASSUMPTION CATHOLIC
CHURCH, THREE OAKS, MICHIGAN

The Father — the only color in a sea of suburban white. His accent is thick, but his joy and love are clear as day.

Missing the holy water at the entrance announces me as a stranger, but I certainly don't feel like an intruder.

My eyes track to the red trickling from the life-size Christ above the altar, where the spear separated blood from water.

Idols are everywhere. Not sure if that is the right word for them, but statues and pictures decorate the whole chapel. There are so many, I feel like a kid in a toy shop, looking everywhere, trying my best to find one that I like the most.

Best of all is the calm that soon settles over me. I stand, sit, kneel, stand, sit, kneel, as the others do, and don't feel self-conscious when I miss a beat. There is no judgment here.

Among the ceremonies and memorized traditions, one man's voice stands out from the rest. When he asks God to hear his prayers, he is not just reciting; he is pleading. He is pleading like he knows something we don't. Pleading like maybe he will meet the Lord sooner than the rest of us. You

can hear it in his voice, in his clenched eyes, in his white grip upon the pew in front of him.

His passion is touching, and I am jealous.

When communion begins, I desperately want to go forth, receive the Father's blessing, but I am an outsider, and do not know the formalities, so I stay in my seat, and gaze up at my Lord, with his mother to the left, and Peter (or is it Paul?) on his right.

I gaze, and I pray. Just thankful to be here.

As I leave, I think about what the Father said — the special ingredient to combat the darkness of this world is love.

I think about that, and smile.

Maybe I can make it back in time for bacon.

Jacob W. Surface is a preacher, teacher and writer. He is the faculty advisor of Franklin Community High School's literary magazine, *Bear Attack*. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Etchings Magazine*, *The Northwest Indiana Literary Journal*, *ClayJar Review* and on the Radio FreeWrite podcast. His first book of poetry and short fiction, *Something Dark and Others* is now available on all major bookseller sites. He lives in the Hoosier state with his wife, daughter, and two cats.

NONFICTION

NONFICTION

Rexford Chase Nicholson

THE DAY THE WHALE BLEW ITS NOSE IN MY FACE

This is a true story, and I do not want it to be a spoof, but we humor ourselves sometimes to deal with our pesky anxiety. That said, I can't help giving a nod to the humor writer Dave Barry's line, "I'm not making this up!" I was fifty years old when I learned I had the 'big C', cancer. I found out when I finally went to the doctor to find out about an annoying, not-so-little red and black sore on my upper left arm that itched like crazy and hurt deep in my muscle whenever I scratched it.

My doctor told me it was malignant melanoma, which is one of the fastest spreading cancers. He then informed me that if it had already spread through the rest of my body (he actually smiled when he said this), I'd be dead in a year, and they could do nothing except help with pain. Then he told me he would have to take a sample, a biopsy, of the surrounding flesh to see if it had already metastasized; and, if it had happened, it would be 'lights out' for me.

(Er ... ah ... sniff, snorkel, snort ...) "Do you mean me being dead, Doc?"

"Yes, and I do mean dead, the deep sixed, gone-zo my poor little beleaguered not so patient patient." No, I lied, he did not say that (being a man of science, he was not that obtuse. I only thought he said it).

Then he said, "Come back in a month (four weeks?), and we'll take it out and send it into the lab to see if it has indeed metastasized, and two weeks

after that we'll get the results. And then, we'll know if you will live or if you will die."

Say what, home boy!?!? I might have one measly year to live!? But I must wait for six weeks to know for sure!? I may be standing here dying at this very minute, and you say wait six weeks!?

What am I supposed to do for six weeks!?

I tried not to panic, but I panicked. My world was sliding into darkness, and I was going crazy with fear. I reached out into the unknown, trying to grasp something, anything, anything real to occupy my mind during the time I had to wait calmly (not!) to certify my impending death.

The next day, after a long, anxious night of fever-pitched entreaty for divine intercession, something unexpected happened. It came in the afternoon's mail. It was a misdirected invitation to a three-day conference for Baptist ministers in Andover, Massachusetts, seven hours from my little Downeast Maine community. I would have preferred a six-week stint as a makeup artist for Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition, but when you're hopeless, you take what you can get.

Here is when things get a little weird, or supernatural, if you believe in such things. 'Focus on the Family' organized the conference specifically for overworked pastors who were stressed and close to burnout. I was none of the above since I was no longer a Pastor. I had retired and was working a day job in temporal bliss and not expecting cancer. I must have been on some list somewhere in this digitally pervasive world. However, since I had just of late offered up my fervent prayers to our Divine Being, and since I love a freebie, my not so humble me was not going to correct their mistake. So, my wife and I jumped at the chance to get away from my panicky fear that I had only one last year left to live.

Was that God answering my prayer? Read on, you'll find out.

The conference was for Baptist Ministers, and if you know anything about Baptists, you know they shun any outward signs of emotion (so as not to crack their hard shell). But that did not stop God. Right in the middle of his sermonizing, the conference leader called out my name and asked me to come up front to the platform. I panicked. What's up with that? Did they find out I was an interloper taking advantage of their freebies? Nope, they called me up front so that three hundred Pastors could pray for me. Who knew? How did all these staid, self-controlled Baptists step out of the norm and reach out on my behalf? You tell me.

When the three-day conference was over, and it was time to head home, my wife suggested we go on a whale watching tour out of Nantucket. I was in no mood to do it but felt it would be a noble thing for a dying man to humor his wife. And, since Nantucket is right next to Andover, I said, "What da hey, let's go for it!" That was when I found out I am prone to seasickness. The boat went up and down, up and down. Unfortunately, my stomach's contents went down when the boat went up and up when the boat went down.

The boat captain said he found a large school of shrimp under the water (where else). He said that the coast of Nantucket was a well-known feeding area for North Atlantic Right Whales, and that's why they had a thriving whale watching business, *gee, how apropos*.

Once out in the rolling swells, while I was trying not to upchuck in front of strangers and possibly get arrested for polluting the ocean, and while we were circling around above the shrimpy little whale bait area, waiting for a whale to show, an old lady shouted, "Thar she blows!" Not being a certified whale watcher, I thought 'Thar she blows' meant someone had

passed a huge gas cloud from their backside, and she was warning us to stop what we were doing and hold our noses. So, while I was wondering what she really meant (and hoping it was not obscene), I hesitated for too long and could not get to the boat rail in time to see the denizen of the deep because it was already packed three-deep with over-excited, bluish-white-haired, camera-clicking whale voyeurs.

In truth, I was just not paying attention. I was watching the sky change from blue to grey while the sea rolled up and down, up and down, as I was trying not to hurl. While everyone was watching a big fat shrimp gorging 'Righty', I was seeing the sky fill with menacing black clouds. "She's blowing up a storm, Captain," I shouted, "we got to head her for port!" But no one heard me because the tourists were busy elbowing each other aside for the best spot to click their cameras. Then I remembered I was on a whale watching tour boat that was going up and down up and down, and that my stomach's contents (three hot dogs, a banana-split, and an extra-large cream soda) wanted out of the whole sorry mess.

Apparently, right by the side of the boat (which I could not see because of the triple-thick barrier of blue-haired grannies) there was a huge Right Whale rising and diving with its giant mouth scooping up poor helpless little shrimp by the tons. (One wonders where they get all the shrimp. Or if they did not eat so many, how long would it take for the ocean to have shrimp glut?)

Anyway, lucky for me, it was too late to get to see where the whale was feeding and splashing and spouting like an undisciplined, narcissistic third grader at a school picnic. Besides, I am too antisocial to elbow my way through a stout, overexcited crowd of silver saints with bowel control issues.

Then something great and/or weird and/or serendipitous happened: a voice spoke inside my feeble mind, and not my voice. How? I don't know, but it said, *Go to the other side of the boat*. Before I could think the usual doubting Thomas thoughts, I did it! I went! But why did I do it? I did it because I did not think to not do it. That was new for me since I overthink everything. This time, I obeyed with empty mind fog because I was fearing the storm.

I was sure nothing would happen (except maybe me barfing into Captain Nemo's Garden). And sure enough, nothing happened. No! Wait! I lied ... something did happen. A miracle happened. That big black little baby of a Right Whale dove (or dived, depending on how persnickety you want to be) down under the boat and came right up to where I was leaning over the rail, ready to barf from going up and down, up and down. (I am not making this up!) As I was hanging over the rail staring down at the water thinking it was a suitable time to rid myself of my stomach contents, suddenly, right there, not six feet below me, and before I could shout, "Thar she blows!", the whale came up and blew its nose, right into my face. Yuk!

I mean, she blew a full shot of waterlogged whale snot right in my face and drenched everything: my face, hair, and all my brandy-new L. L. Bean super elite sports apparel. It was unbelievable, and therefore, of course, I couldn't believe it. I doubt you believe me either. But I do not care because it really did happen, and I do not need your ill-informed opinion, anyway, so there! But look, it is too weird and too crazy to make up. And even if you do not believe me, I don't know you, so get over yourself.

Have you ever looked down directly into a whale's nose? The only ones I can think of who might have also experienced this are Gregory Peck, Captain Ahab, and many other assorted whaling sailors from centuries

ago. And I am the only one who lived. So, ha, ha, right there, huh? Right there!

Anyway, what does a whale's waterspout smell like? I bet you don't know that, either. Yeah right, you don't, so don't lie. And, stop thinking negative thoughts about me and listen up! Whale breath smells like fresh, wonderful shrimp, and that makes perfect sense since they were sucking up the innocent little baby bloomers and chunking them down, as it were, by the tons. I smelled the overwhelmingly beautiful smell of fresh raw shrimp (sans the horseradish sauce, of course). But still the whale's breath was fresh, and clean and wonderful. If you love shrimp like I do, you would be smiling like I was as I wiped my face on the sleeve of my brandy-new L.L. Bean, green, blue felt-lined parka, with a hidden waterproof zipper pocket for my wallet. Anyway, I felt very privileged to be someone with such a unique experience in this replicated, stereotypical Andy Warhol world.

And I bet you do not know what a whale's nose looks like, do you? Yeah, that's what I thought. So, what does it look like? Guess what? A whale's nose looks just like your nose, or my nose, or any other nose. In fact, except for being flat and almost level with the surface of the back of its head, it looks exactly like the plastic nose you pin on Mr. Potato Head. (That is so ridiculous, you must know I am not making this up.) Yup, it is just like that, a flat-nosed Mr. Potato Whale Head. So, why is a whale's nose in the back of its head instead of on its face like yours, you ask? I am glad you asked because I know something you don't know, so Ha! Well, simply because ... Er, I guess ... ah ... um, well, I don't know why. Maybe it's because God made it that way (ya think!?). Maybe it had to be that way because if it was in front of the whale's face, when the whale inhaled, it would be sucking sea water into its lungs and drown. Yes, that sounds right, good thinking, Rexford. So, God said, "Leteth the noseth be puteth in the backeth of the whale's headeth! Thus, whenceth so evereth he doth

inhaleth he shall not drowneth or haveth to beach himself and dieth.”
God is so creative, don’t you think?

Now, although this story is funny and weird and true, I want to say how privileged I feel to have actually lived it. That is because there is a deeper story hidden within this. Now, you may ask, “What could possibly be salvaged from such a fragmented circumlocution?” I am glad you asked.

The hidden treasure in this story has to do with prescience. It has to do with intuition, with the sixth sense, *the knowing without knowing how we know*. What this experience taught me (while I was on my wonderful serendipity-free Pastor’s conference and whale watching tour and while I was living my last dying year) was to act upon that still small voice that comes from within. That voice that comes uninvited, without apology, and without worrying whether we obey or not. That intuitive voice has no agenda; it just comes and says what it says, and then it goes as if by chance. But now I know it’s not chance.

Has this prescience ever happened to you? I will bet it has. And just like me, I bet you did not pay any attention to it at first. Who would or could initially trust that irrational knowing that comes from inside yourself? It jumps into our thoughts; it is a voice we don’t have, and it comes from somewhere we don’t know, and we are not inclined to trust it.

The deeper meaning of this true, weird story is the validation of the Spirit’s inner voice. Since the whale experience, I have come to pay closer attention to that leading. I am not saying I trust it completely, without reservation. I reserve the right to have reservations, and I always will. But I no longer discount that inner voice out of hand, without pause. I have learned to better hear my inner spirit being. We receive this spirit voice in the most supernatural, healing, life-giving way that we could never imagine.

It has happened occasionally for me in times past when I was not listening. But since cancer and the serendipity Pastor's retreat and the seasick whale trip, it happens surprisingly often now. So, now I listen more. I have been sensitized to the unseen world, and because of this, I hear the voice even more. I have learned that if one wants to listen to that inner voice, and if one gives it more credence as our life experience grows, and if we hold off our doubt a bit longer, and listen a bit closer, it becomes a very valuable tool for health, protection, and new, insightful knowing. Since this very concrete experience of listening to my inner voice, I have seen things happen before they happen — both mundane things and earthshaking things. Yes, it is weird, but weird isn't always bad. I have validated for myself that there are many things beyond the everyday material world about which we don't know. I have found we can sense the supernatural, the beyond normal, ordinary things, if we exercise that part of ourselves that can see beyond the banal and pedestrian.

So, my story starts with a retired old minister who gets a diagnosis of cancer's threat of death and cries out to his God for mercy. Then supernatural things begin to happen. First, he receives an invitation to a conference he has no right to go to. Next, he gets prayed for by a large group of Baptist Ministers who are not outward about their religious practices. Then he goes on a whale watching tour, which he is not really interested in, but goes anyway, at his wife's insistence, where he is half sick and nauseous from the ocean swells. Then he gets shut out of the chance to actually see a whale because of the dark clouds, signaling a storm is coming. And then, out of the blue, he hears a voice in his head, *go to the other side of the boat*. Then, up comes the whale who blows his waterlogged shrimp-scented breath right in his face like some kind of supernatural baptism from the deep. Now, if you cannot see the mysterious hand of God in all that, then your life must be dull and

burdensome to you. And not just to you, but also, maybe a bit burdensome to those who love you.

You may never feel like Ahab or Gregory Peck, or have the unique experience I did, but you can learn to be more aware of that certain guiding voice that comes from somewhere deep inside, where someone/something cares about you and works for your good. I sincerely hope you find it, and I wish you good fortune going forward.

Finally, just so you know, all of this took place 30 years ago. I'm here today to share my experience because the melanoma was removed before it could spread. And I am happy to say, I am still here to praise my Father Creator.

Rexford Chase Nicholson writes poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction portraying his 82 years of pain, struggle, joy and deliverance. He watched and listened and learned. Now, at last, he is compelled to share.

NONFICTION

Wendy Westley

THE TEMPTATION

The Bible tells you that there's nothing new under the sun, especially temptation arriving on the scene in Eden. And I learned that again at the gas station, on one relentlessly dull day.

My husband and I had stopped to stretch our legs, have a much-needed coffee, perhaps a snack. A donut laced with lemon icing, perhaps, or cinnamon toast glistening with buttery flavor? More temptations.

Of course, I needed to use the restroom first, and also wash my hands. But there on the gray tiled floor was something glittery, sparkly. Intriguing.

There were no curtains at the small window, only a shabby blind, so it couldn't be a simple brass curtain ring. No, I thought, it was too shiny, too interesting. It called to me to investigate, to satisfy my insatiable curiosity.

It didn't disappoint.

It was a stunningly beautiful ring, and as I turned it over in my hands, as carefully as you would examine a newborn baby, there shone several precious jewels; it was a heavy weight in my cradling hand, with an unusual maker's mark. I loved it, even as it scorched my sweaty palm.

And as the temptation seeped into my soul, I discovered that it fitted my ring finger to absolute perfection.

I love jewelry. Real, junk, colorful, tasteful. So sly questions were already snaking into my brain.

‘What are the chances of the owner coming back to claim it?’

‘If I handed it in, would the staff member keep it all for herself?’

I continued to ponder.

After all, there’s not much honesty in our society, is there? Is there?

Precisely.

It was just a momentary pull, that temptation, to keep this precious find just for myself. Almost immediately, I started to think of how the owner would feel, how heartbroken she would be, at this loss. I wondered if I could really justify stealing her personal treasure. For essentially, that is what it would amount to.

I slipped the ring off my finger with a sigh — a mixture of regret and quiet conviction. I was doing the right thing.

I exited the restroom, and I looked around at the serving staff, mostly women and probably as humanly frail as I, so I hesitated. I asked to speak to the manager, putting my trust in his or her senior role as one of accountability and trust.

In fact, the manager was a man, unlikely (I thought) to be tempted by such fripperies.

The bejeweled ring was duly and safely locked away, as I breathed my quiet thanks and heartfelt relief, leaving me with a clear conscience and plenty of time for consumables.

It was a little later while we were still breakfasting, that I was approached by the smiling manager and a sobbing young girl, face washed pale with tears.

Ring now securely on her finger, and joy radiating from her face, she came to give me crushing hugs and sincere thanks.

She had turned back in almost-blind panic as soon as she saw that her slim finger was shockingly bare, and drove back with many prayers and cries.

I was more than a bit ashamed when she praised me for my civic honesty, as I had been severely and so selfishly tempted.

But my own frail but genuine faith (and the fact that the manager was a middle-aged, no-nonsense male, not interested in bling) had provided me with the escape route I needed to resist.

She wasn't the only grateful one.

Wendy Westley was a successful nurse and midwife in the U.K. and now writes short stories and poetry in retirement. Her poetry has been published in: *Pulsar Poetry Webzine*, *Amethyst Review*, *Spirit Fire Review*, *Underbelly Magazine*, and *The Seventh Quarry Press*.

NONFICTION

Lucy Swan

ARE NOT TWO SPARROWS SOLD FOR A PENNY?

Portland in February. Supposedly it is a good time of year to visit Oregon, but I might call it bipolar. The weather had that kind of temperament. Indecisive, mercurial. Deceptively sunny, then would hit me sideways with gray rain. On a rainy Thursday, we drove to see the falls near Bridal Veil. The town (it is a town) rests along the south side of the Columbia River, and has nothing but waterfall trails and a post office. The rain there had a fresh mossy scent that provided great relief from the sour rust smell of the wet city. I cupped it in my lungs. It was sharp.

From the parking lot, we could already see Multnomah Falls. The blurry white ribbon unspooled from an abrupt cliff. So many trees, dark and green, crowded the slopes. I said our breath in the cold made us look like dragons. He said it was like we were smoking hookah.

We walked through a tunnel that slipped under the highway and past the visitor's center to stand at the spitting foot of the waterfall. Icy droplets freckled my pink face. I said that it was cold. I said it was cold louder, because he did not hear me over the shushing of the rushing water. I tucked my nose and chin under the collar of my sweatshirt and blew warm air onto my chest. He took my hands between his, rubbing feeling back into my stiffening fingers. My head tilted to the side. I smiled at him. It was nice when he did things like that.

We followed slick stone steps up to a bridge. From there, the falls were nearly indistinguishable from the rain; white water disappeared into white

air. I thought it was funny that we came all that way in all that water to see more water. I laughed and told him this. He did not seem to think it was as funny as I did. The rain fell heavier, and we left soon after that.

On our way back to his house, we stopped in Gresham. There was a coffeehouse there at the corner of NE 3rd Street and N Main Avenue called Café Delirium, which is now permanently closed. Inside was a yellow and blue tartan couch, several distinguished armchairs, bar seating facing the street, a painting of Shakespeare, and a 1970's television set repurposed as an end table. We ordered at the wooden counter. He paid and flashed a smile at the pretty barista. I wished I could have crawled out of my own green skin and into hers. He dropped his change in a paper cup with "tips" sharpied on. The coins clinked lightly against each other. We found seats near the door, and he propped his feet up on an orange ottoman that looked to me exactly like a giant wheel of cheese. I stifled a laugh and he asked why, so I told him. He seemed to think this was funny, and I could smile a little easier. When I turned to the window, it looked like the sky was clearing up. Our drinks were ready at the counter. As we left, the door's little bell chimed, starlike.

The sidewalks on North Main were laid with square cement tiles. They broke and slanted over sprawling tree roots and under years of heavy foot traffic. Rain filled these uneven spaces with its cold and lifeless puddles. Closer, I could see my reflection in them. The thin sprinkle disturbing the surface made me look faceless. In physics, it is the law of reflection applied to dimpled water that scattered my face like that. These ripples caught my image and returned them at wrong angles. As streetlights fall into astigmatic puddles, something fractured still strains upwards. It is like the fall of a wounded bird. From the ground, her crooked wing bends at an angle, directed towards the cold Oregon sky. Reaching.

At dinner that night, his mother told me he once tended to a bird like this. She said he found the poor thing lying on her back on the glistening sidewalk. Her feathers were crumpled. She must have fallen from a tall tree, because her beak was chipped on the left side. Or maybe she hit something on the way down. Cradling her with sorry hands, he tucked her into his chest. He carried her home like that, shielding her from the rain. It flicked against his raincoat in small plasticky pitters. He was only a little boy, his mother said. I nodded and smiled, but kept my eyes on my plate.

It occurred to me. The thought was enough to make me forget the fork in my hand. It slipped and clattered against the ceramic plate. He must have had little boy hands then. Those careful hands would have pet her dry with a hand towel. Small and gentle fingers would have stroked her downy breast. They would have scraped through mud and dirt after lacquered beetles to feed her. I think his mother told me this to reassure me or perhaps to preserve him. Today, I cannot help feeling some kind of soft grieving rage against her. But she could not have known. I have to remind myself that she could not have known.

She described those innocent hands, and I tried to picture them. I wanted to give them credit, but there they were right in front of me, across the table, poking fork tines at the green beans and rice grains on his plate. Turning his glass in slow whirlpools. Wadding his oily napkin into a familiar fist.

I wanted to forget those hands pressing hard against my chest. How I tumbled flightless from his bed. My front tooth chipped against his dresser. It tingled in my mouth for days, a small sharp edge I worried with my tongue. I didn't want anyone to notice. A week later, I perched on my bathroom counter, scraping it even with a nail file. Another night, I tried

whispering into his ear. Words so small they crawled like beetles out of my throat.

I said that I was scared.

I said that I was — those hands closed over my mouth, shushed me.

“Can you just ___ it one more time.”

He did not wait for an answer. It would not have made sense to. It was not a question.

Afterwards, I rehearsed small excuses like prayers.

It was an accident. He did not hear me.

I used to ask God this question like a quiet ache: why not me? That tenderness had been spent on a bird. A *bird*.

One night I told God to fuck off and waited for the cold tile against my back to split open and swallow me. It didn't.

It has been a few years now. Sometimes I wonder if the residue of that ache will ever wash away. Sometimes I think that if it had never happened, I would be able to sprout feathers and fly. But sometimes, a strange clarity strikes me. A small insistence. The faintest pressure on my chest that I might be worth something. When that happens, I want to wander back to that avenue. Listen to the sweet trilling of birds in the trees. Look at my reflection on the ground. I imagine there waits a steady puddle that gives me back to myself. Harder to see in the rain. But when the sun comes out, the surface stills, and I am a clearer image. The world smells the way it smells after rain, like the whole of it is made of pure copper. Rich. Heavy.

I pause and fill my lungs with it, all the way to the brim, and keep walking away from a corner coffeeshouse in Oregon, which closed.

NONFICTION

Jessica Lynne Henkle

YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD

He came into the room and took the only available seat, which happened to be right next to me. With one hand, he pulled a package of cookies from his jacket pocket, tore it open, then held it out. “Want a cookie?” he asked. “No, thank you,” I said, and that was how we met. It was my first time attending the new church group I had just joined. After we all introduced ourselves, the first discussion question was posed, and the man sitting next to me said, “I think it’s a weak question.” He went on to explain why, and I thought, *Here we go*. Later, when telling my best friend about the group, I would refer to him as “the abrasive guy.” But toward the end of the night, after we had prayed, he turned to me again and asked what kind of books I wrote. I told him, and I found out he knew about Ursula Le Guin (one of my favorite authors) and that he, too, loved the Pacific Northwest for its vast and varied trees. I thought then that he might be all right.

The past year had been a bad year for me. It had been an especially bad summer. I had been pushed to the edge of wondering if there was any point to our individual lives, if God did in fact have a purpose for each of us. I had spent the year and a half since the first Covid lockdown circling and simmering in a stew of my own dilemmas and had come out feeling less like a Christian human being and more like spiritual haggis. I did not want to join a church group, and after missing the first two meetings (for more or less legitimate reasons), my best friend — patron saint of my nihilistic tendencies — convinced me to go to the third. “Just go once,” she said. “And if you hate it, you never have to go again.” I went, and of course, I didn’t hate it. But I was not yet out of the whirlwind, and so, I

ingested it all — especially the man who sat next to me—with a potent mix of hope and fear.

Nine years before, I had joined a different church group, where I'd also met a man who quickly grew on me. Within a few short months, he became both the greatest love and the greatest heartbreak of my life. I haven't regarded a man since without extreme caution. But when this new man asked to read the essay I would be sharing at an upcoming event, then recorded himself reading it aloud so I "could get the full experience," he already had my heart a little. We went to lunch one Sunday after church, unplanned, and we planned to get together again soon after. Over the next few weeks, he gave me so much attention, I didn't know how he could not have been interested. And so, I let my guard down, and down it was when we wandered through Forest Park on a four-hour hike, and I was lightheaded and euphoric from a lack of food and (what I thought was) the bloom of new love, when he looked at me and said, "I'd like to be your friend."

To understand the full and brutal impact of that statement, we have to go back nine years, yet again: to the first man and the worst heartbreak. We, too, had shared an unplanned meal after church. We, too, had planned to get together again soon after. We, too, had hiked in November, through a fog-dense forest. But that first man had told me he loved me, had told me he wanted to marry me, had asked me what kind of engagement ring I wanted before he backpedaled and decided we needed to be friends — and then, when I protested, decided he had never loved me after all, that we had never been in a relationship, that I was crazy and conceited and, above all, foolish for believing my life was some great story God was telling. And so, comparatively speaking, what this new man did was not so bad. But the memory of that first experience still sat in my heart like a bombed-out village, and so, I still broke down in hyperventilating tears the moment I found myself, yet again, alone.

The first and greatest command is this: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”¹ So said Jesus, and per Jesus usual, He placed no conditions around that. You shall love the Lord your God whether you feel like a Christian human being or like spiritual haggis, whether you greet the day with exuberance or find little reason to greet it at all. You shall love the Lord your God when He grants you your greatest earthly desire, and you shall love Him just the same when He lets you ask Him for the same thing, over and over, for fifteen years with little to no evidence that He’s even listening. And above all, you shall love the Lord your God when life begins to feel less like something you’re living and more like a nightmare you just keep repeating to different degrees of severity. You shall love the Lord your God nonetheless, and you shall wonder how on earth you’re supposed to do that — shall wonder if a more impossible command has ever been laid on humanity.

Of all the questions that gnaw at my heart, the most staggering is not only *why am I still single?* but *why is virtually every interaction I have with a man just a different degree of the same nightmare?* For this was not merely the second time I had experienced the “I like you, just kidding, ha ha” dropkick off the romantic mountainside — this routine had become so familiar, it was bordering on unbelievable. On the way home from that ill-fated hike, trying to maintain enough composure to operate a motor vehicle, I hollered straight at the windshield and into the sky, “Is it that hard to bring me someone who actually wants to be with me?” To say I was, by then, at my wits’ end would be a terrible understatement. To say that I did, after ten years of following Him, truly love the Lord my God but remained perplexed to the point of despair as to why He seemed so absent where I needed to witness Him the most would be a further understatement still. My love for Him, while present, was leaking from

the holes in my bombed-out heart — holes it seemed no amount of prayer could patch up.

During the time of the greatest heartbreak, there had been an interval between when that man decided he didn't want to be with me and when he said all of the cruel things that finally convinced me he wasn't going to change his mind. And during that interval, I held onto my belief that he was the person God intended me to be with, and I just had to wait it out. I continued to maintain contact with him, which, in the end, only worsened my heartbreak and struck a fault line in my faith. So when the new man continued to text me, to call me, to want to spend time with me, I wasn't sure what to think. I did not feel, as I had with the first man, that he was definitively "the one." Truth be told, I didn't know how I felt about him, just that he was a possibility, and God wasn't giving me any indication of what that possibility might lead to. But it was there, like a partially open door, and I couldn't bring myself to close it, not yet. And so, I waited it out.

I waited it out in the way I waited best: by maintaining an outward appearance of casual calm, which disguised the torrential hysteria within. But soon, the hysteria morphed into a depression I could not disguise, and we talked about depression, he and I, while I somehow managed to keep from revealing the thing I was depressed about. I prayed, and I pondered, and I asked the Lord why I was being made to go through this, yet again, and one day, He said to me, "You have to climb back up the way you fell down." "And if I do that," I said, "if I wait this out, will you promise me it won't turn out the same way?" But He did not reply, and in that silence, I did not detect His absence, but rather, His presence, which would be with me no matter what, but would not tell me how this was going to play out. And the more I hung in that uncertainty, the more my fears began to multiply, until they became larger than even my desire to be in a

relationship, and I found myself saying to God, “No, not like this. I don’t want it this way.”

I had learned by then, through a number of experiences, that it was not up to me to dictate the terms of my existence. But my nerves in this area were so frayed that emotion overtook reason, and if there is anything in me that equates to “giving the devil a foothold,” it’s that. “Not this way,” I told God. “Not like this.” And I began to dwell on the other, perhaps most painful part of my most painful heartbreak: the fact that, mere weeks after discarding me, he had taken up with a much younger woman, whom he soon married. I then got to watch them from afar every Sunday at the church we all continued to attend, until a few years later, when they mercifully moved away. Of all the things I did not want to relive, this was at the top of what was admittedly a very long list. I imagined it with this new man until I made myself sick, and one bad night, in a very long string of bad nights, I said to God, “If you do this to me again, I’m done.”

And I knew, as soon as I said it, that it didn’t work like that — that both the tremendous security and the terrible injustice of the faith God had formed in me were such that I would never walk away from Him, no matter what He did, because I knew full well that there was nowhere else to go. And that infuriated me. I wanted God to have some skin in the game, too — some point to which He could not push me without breaking our bond. But there was no such point. He was the God of the universe, and I was a mere mortal. The teams were not equal; the game was unfair. But it was the only game we were given to play, and short of sitting down and refusing to go on, there was nothing I could do *but* go on, come hell or high water or cruel men and their child brides. But would I want God to be there with me if He let this happen again? I could not fathom a scenario in which I would cease to believe in Him, but loving Him was another question.

The next morning, I awoke in the thick haze of remorse, the way I imagine a married couple wakes after a fight. I crawled out of bed, still fuming, still uncertain of so many things. But my reason had managed to crack through my tailspin, and I knew, while I stood by much of what I'd said the night before, I had been wrong about one thing. "I'm sorry," I said to God. "Forgive me. There is no place I can fall where I won't want You with me." And I meant it. I felt it in my marrow, as deep as deep can go, that no matter what happened with this new guy or any guy or anyone or anything — no matter how angry or confused I got with God — I would still want Him with me nonetheless. Not just because there was nowhere else to go or because I was afraid of what would happen without Him, but because I loved Him, plain and simple. All my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength had come to know how to do nothing else but love the Lord my God.

In an essay called "Love," Frederick Buechner writes of a time when one of his children was hospitalized for severe depression — a depression so severe, she had lost the will to live.² He talks of how he and his wife went to visit their daughter every day, how this was a time that felt as much like a wilderness devoid of God as anything ever had. He speaks of the command to love the Lord and writes, "To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the great and first commandment nonetheless." And I think it is the great and first commandment, not because God delights in imposing impossibilities on us, but because He knows that even in the wilderness — especially in the wilderness — love for Him is the only thing that will sustain us.

Those questions I had been asking before I met this new man — about the point and purpose of our lives, if there even was one — had been settled one day by the simplest thing: a few words of Jesus to His disciples,

“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.”³ At first, I had remembered it incorrectly, had thought Jesus said, “Behold, I go up to Jerusalem,” but when I looked up the verse, I realized I’d been wrong. What Jesus did then, so He does now: what He does, He does with us, and while we may not know where we’re going or why, He does — and it matters. The peace and security that poured through me when I realized this, I cannot put into words, but I know I would not have felt it if I did not love the God who said it. And this was the same God who’d led me back to the precipice of my worst earthly fear, and it was there I found what Buechner found in the hospital where he visited his daughter. “For the first time in my life,” he writes, “I caught a glimpse of what it must be like to love God truly, for his own sake, to love him no matter what.”

I continued to wait things out with that new man, but I stopped placing conditions on God. I let go of the tether, so to speak, and let myself be carried out to sea — for it was clear, whatever would or would not happen, that God wanted me to trust Him in this. He wanted me to climb back up the way I’d fallen down, for it was during the greatest heartbreak that my trust in Him (and in myself) had been broken. I prayed, and I waited, and then, one day, that man unceremoniously announced to me that he’d been dating someone, spoke of her to me as though I was just a pal he shared information with, you know, when he felt like it. My heart dropped to the center of the earth. A few weeks after that, he brought a woman to the final meeting of our church group — a different woman, it turned out, than the one he’d been dating — and I watched the two of them the way I imagine Sisyphus watched the boulder roll back towards him.

“The farthest reach of our love for God,” Buechner writes, “is loving him when in almost every way that matters we can neither see him nor hear him ... and when the worst of the wilderness for us is the fear that he has forsaken us if indeed he exists at all.” The worst had happened, yet again.

To say that I understood why would be a lie. To say that a part of me didn't die when I saw yet another man with the woman he had chosen instead would also be a lie. And yet, even so, I still found myself in love with God — still found myself willing and wanting to follow Him, and I wondered, as any heartbroken human would wonder, how that could possibly be. “The final secret, I think, is this,” Buechner writes, “that the words ‘You shall love the Lord your God’ become in the end less a command than a promise.” “We love because He first loved us,” John writes.⁴ It is, in the end, less about obeying and more about yielding — saying yes to Jesus, come hell or high water, and finding that your love for Him becomes greater than whatever storm He leads you into. If that is not the very definition of blessing, then I don't know what is.

1. Mark 12:30 [↪](#)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* [↪](#)
3. Matthew 20:18, Mark 10:33, and Luke 18:31 (KJV) [↪](#)
4. 1 John 4:19 [↪](#)

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

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jésica Frustaci

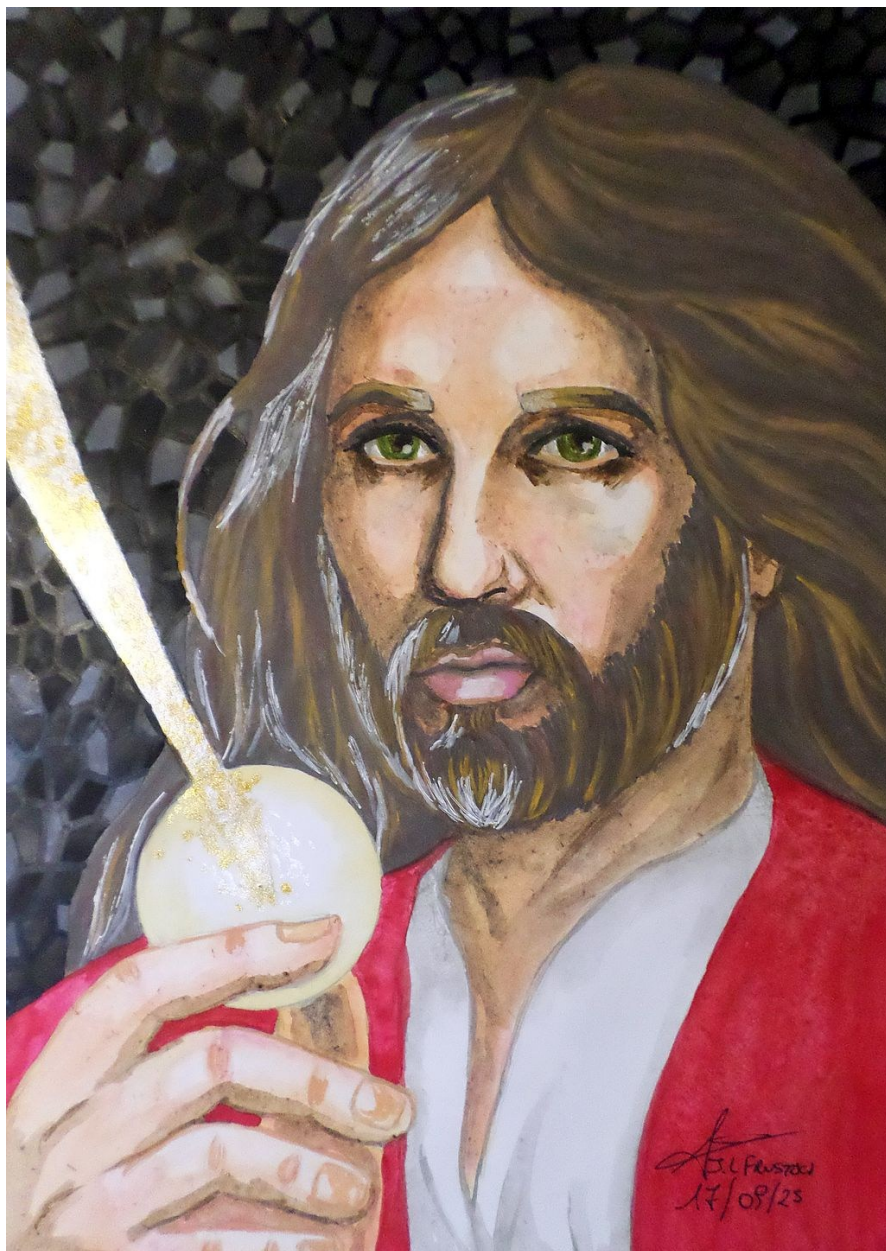
ARCHANGEL GABRIEL (*ARCÁNGEL GABRIEL*)

watercolor and ink on paper



THIS IS MY BODY (*ESTE ES MI CUERPO*)

watercolor and ink on paper



PROPHET ELIJAH (*PROFETA ELÍAS*)

watercolor and ink on paper



Images are courtesy of the artist.

Jésica Frustaci is a self-taught artist and she began her career practicing art therapy. She currently specializes in portraiture. She holds an Honorary Doctorate from The Queen Foundation for Cultures and Arts around the World, directed by Professor Muhammad Al-Hawary, Egypt. Her work has been published in Argentina, Peru, the United States, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. She has participated in numerous exhibitions in Argentina, Russia, the United States, Mexico, Peru, Italy, India, Panama, Spain, and other countries. She has received awards in Argentina, Russia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, among others.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Shinara Weathersby

MERCY STRING



WEIGHTLESS THRONE



ASHEN MISSION CONCEPCIÓN



MISSION CONCEPCIÓN



Images are courtesy of Shinara Weathersby.

Artist Statement: This photography collection reveals the tension between humans, nature and faith. Each photo explores what it means to doubt, believe and sit still within faith. The collection reflects the beauty, struggle and renewal we see all around us. Ultimately, I want my work to capture the wonderful textures of each of these layers.

Shinara Weathersby is an emerging writer and photographer from Texas. Her creative work is shaped by time spent working in National Parks, observing and learning from nature, art, and people. Her first publication of poetry and photography can be found in the 2025 Spring issue of *The Stray Branch*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Susan L. Pollet

MOTHERLY LOVE

acrylic and pastels on paper



FAMILY FISH MEAL

acrylic and pastels on paper



Images are courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement: Drawing inspiration from a combination of her interests in color, composition, dreams, and personal emotions, Susan Pollet's work is a reflection of her search for beauty and meaning. Through the use of pastels, ink, collage or acrylics, she strives to communicate with viewers in a positive and optimistic way. Susan is a New York City-based artist whose eclectic style arises out of a desire to explore a diversity of vehicles. Drawn to haunting landscapes, warm interiors, and dream-like human forms, her works include both impressionistic and abstract themes.

Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC.

Salie Davis

BLACK SHEEP IN FIELD



Artist Statement: Captured on a Sunday drive, this shot of a solitary black sheep set apart from a white flock near a weathered barn was a rare opportunity. The intensity of its focus spoke to me spiritually. Photographed with a Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-H10.

SELF PORTRAIT REFLECTION IN DOOR GLASS



Images are courtesy of Salie Davis.

Artist Statement: This self-portrait explores how earthly reflections distort self-perception through old glass, blurring our vision. Only God's reflection reveals the true self with clarity and grace. Captured with a Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-H10, this image is part of Salie Davis's Reflection in Glass series.

Salie Davis is a multidisciplinary creator whose genre-defying work seeks to honor God through underlying Christian values. Author and visual architect of more than 25 books, she unites poetry, prose, and imagery, crafting stories and symbols that point toward grace, redemption, and truth. Her photography appears on WoPoLi.com.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Meg Freer

BECTIVE ABBEY, COUNTY MEATH, IRELAND



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.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremiah Gilbert

CHAPEL ON THE ROCK, ALLENSPARK,
COLORADO



HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, KARAKOL,
KYRGYZSTAN



ST. GEORGE THE MARTYR CHURCH, KAUNAS,
LITHUANIA



SCOTS' CHURCH, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA



Images are 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

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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