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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR
Heart of Flesh Literary Journal
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HEART OF FLESH LITERARY JOURNAL
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Prayer Warrior III (2025) by Veronica McDonald, acrylic on canvas.

Note from the Editor

"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."
— Isaiah 64:8 (NIV)

About ten years ago, when I was still a new believer, I told God to "just change me. Even if I don't like it, or even if I resist — Just drag me out and change me to whatever You want me to be." As I prayed this, I knew it was what I truly wanted and truly *didn't* want at the same time. I knew whatever needed to change in me, I didn't want to let it go. But this was my surrender. It's been ten years, and I still forget how *unpleasant* it can be for the Lord to change you into a person of character. Getting humbled and disciplined by God isn't the most fun thing ever, but it is clear evidence of His love. He loves us too much to leave us where we are: whether we are stuck, complacent, down, up, a little too comfortable ... and I'm grateful for this truth. The shaping can be downright awful sometimes, but through it, He molds us into people of character. I take comfort that the potter's hands will form us into beautiful vessels, able to perform the Lord's work, if we allow Him.

In our 16th issue, I'm reminded of the different ways the Lord molds and uses us. Many writers in this issue demonstrate how the Lord's "molding" isn't usually what we expect. They show how it can be isolating, lonely, emotionally difficult, and embarrassing, but through these experiences, we are drawn to Jesus' loving arms. In these pages, you'll find characters who are painfully humbled. You'll find characters who ignore the reality of God, even as He works through them and around them, colliding with their preconceived notions of reality. You'll see characters who have evil forces blind them as they slip into complacency, sliding further and further down a dark path, recognizing their need for God only when they no longer recognize themselves. And there are still others, seeking to

believe — waiting for the divine encounter as hope dances around them like will-o'-the-wisps, appearing and disappearing, just out of reach — not yet realizing that Jesus is there, and has been there, the whole time, waiting for their surrender.

I hope the writers and artists of Issue 16 remind you that there is always someone who cares enough about you to change you. He will never leave you right where you are, *as* you are, but will make you into the person you were meant to be.

Thank you to the writers and artists who made this issue possible. Every time I read through submissions I am humbled by the talent of the contributors who entrust us with their work. Thank you to Katie Yee, for not only being a hard worker and meticulous reader, but for being such an encouragement during each submission process. Thank you to my family for their continuous love, patience, and support.

And thank *you*, for reading our 16th issue. I pray that it's a blessing to you during this holiday season.

May God bless you and keep you,



Veronica McDonald
Editor/Founder

POETRY

POETRY

Don Narkevic

Sitting with the Dying

You can no longer have words
with your mother, God's pocket watch
winding down, the nurse no longer
breezing through the room
to fluff a pillow, to report the weather.
The hospice lady arrives like a coroner.
With the voice of a first-grade teacher
she tells you that the dying can hear
a tear drop. You called your mother
some ugly names the day before
her stroke. When the priest arrives
he invites you to pray with him,
the Bible, the beads, the sacred water.
After he leaves, you sit on the bed,
hold her hand, the coldness
of a childhood memory, sledding
down the backyard slope,
Mother at the top, her mouth moving
but too far away to hear.

Don Narkevic: Buckhannon, WV. MFA National University. Poetry appears in *Garland*, *Hedge Apple, Discretionary Love, Pink Ochre Magazine, and Culture Cult*. In 2022, Main Street Rag published a novella of poetry, *After the Lynching*. In 2024, The Potomac Playmakers produced *From Birth*. In 2025, the author won the Ziolkowski Poetry Prize.

POETRY

Jason Martin

How was I to know sobriety would be this lonely?

It was not a choice I made so much
As God reached down with His Infinite Finger
And flicked me behind my ear,
Letting me know enough was enough.

When I started this journey-not-a-destination,
I thought I was in for a different life,
Filled with family and friends;
Love around every turn.

But sobriety allows you to encounter the you
Your drinking allowed you to ignore.
All these years and all that work just to learn:
The me that started drinking was hurting;

The me that stopped drinking was broken
In places and in ways that cannot be fixed
Except by God's Infinite Finger,
Which has been mysteriously hidden since that night.

I never would have dreamed I would be now
Right where I was then, only not drunk.

Liturgy of Loneliness

The nun had moved from near the gaggle of women
Talking non-stop to a quieter place
A few pews behind me to pray.
I looked back at her and smiled;
She looked right through me.

Nuns are married to Jesus;
Priests are married to the Church.
Yet, all that was betrothed to me
Was this cross of loneliness,
An unfulfilled longing of nature.

I cried out to the Lord who from
His arrest to His resurrection was alone.
By the end of Mass, no answer came,
And I wind up at the same places as always,
Committing the same sins I just confessed.

Jason Martin is a Florida Man who enjoys going to Mass and summer thunderstorms. While he has always fancied himself a writer, he only started taking writing seriously as he approached 50.

POETRY

John Brixter Tino

The Kindness that Came Before Me

I was given a body before I could ask for one. The light was already in the room when I arrived, warm as bread left on the table by a hand I have never seen. I think of it now — the way the fig tree held its fruit through August, how the rain came without being summoned, filling the clay bowl on the step. Who arranged the dark so gently around the sleeping child I was? Who set the moon in its arc and thought of me? I have been loved longer than I have been alive. The evidence is everywhere: in the marrow, in the first milk, in the particular curve of my mother's arm before she knew my name. There is a tenderness I did not earn. It precedes me the way dawn precedes the field, the way water precedes thirst. I open my hands and find them already full. Once, standing in the kitchen at dusk, I watched the last sun move across the wall like a palm laid flat against a sleeping back — and I understood I had been touched before I ever learned the word for touch. The kindness is structural. It holds the bones in place. It lines the throat so the voice can carry grief without breaking. I want to say I am grateful the way a well is grateful — by being full, by being still, by giving back what was given in the dark. And if love is the first language, then I was spoken into being softly, deliberately, the way a seed is set beneath the soil — with faith it would know which direction to reach.

Blessed in the Small Hours

I wake at three to the refrigerator's click, its compressor settling
into silence like a held breath released. The kitchen floor is cold
beneath my feet. I fill a glass, drink standing in the blue dark, water
tasting of iron and sleep. Through the window, a streetlamp throws
its cone of light across the frozen yard. Ice on the birch limbs catches
it, fractures it into something I have no name for. I am alone and
the house breathes around me, its radiators ticking as they cool.
The cat finds me, winds between my ankles, her purr a low engine
turning over in the dark. I press my palm flat to the glass. The cold
enters me like a fact. Somewhere, a truck downshifts on the overpass,
and I hear in it a kind of music — the world still working while we
lie still. My wife sleeps above me, her mouth open, one arm flung
across the sheet as if reaching for what she dreamed. I could stay
here for hours, watching the fog build its cathedral on the pane,
crystal by crystal, patient as anything I've ever seen. The dark asks
nothing. I give it nothing back. We hold there together, the glass
between my hand and winter, the whole house settling on its
bones. Soon the sky will thin. Soon I will go back to bed.
I stand here a little longer, blessed, useless, entirely awake.

John Brixter Tino is a son of a fisherman and is a person with disabilities. He was raised in Perez, Quezon, Philippines. He currently serves as a part-time instructor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

P. Murray Rankin

FINGERBONES

My mother's gnarled fingerbones
ladled water to cool my fevered brow,
though she herself wasn't long for this world.
Anyone could see it.
                But to see that
water fill with light, to feel the body
as a body shot with light ...

My mother's fingers turned to kindling
in the end, ten dry sticks steepled
to receive the spark, to impart
one final lesson:
When they've snuffed every fire,
my son, make yourself a flame.

Beloved
hands cupped to empty me dry and light as
breath my mother's death tethered me for a time,
then released me to drift high up
Moriah's cragged face so like my mother's
cragged face.
                My mother the mountain, crumbling
now to bone to dust motes hovering
at the cave's mouth pierced with light.

Climbing

As a boy I often danced.
Sadness stalked the edges
of every thought.
I could shout
but never sang.

As a boy I climbed
every tree I could find
every boulder, every ladder,
hill, or mountain, thinking
God would meet me
in some desolate height
when, all the while, God
was descending low and lower
into the depths of the earth.

P. Murray Rankin has an MFA from Warren Wilson College and lives with his family in Jackson, Mississippi, where he writes, grows food, teaches workshops, chases wild birds, ministers to families of homicide victims, and misquotes Emily Dickinson to unsuspecting strangers. His work has also appeared in *Southlands, Solstice,* and elsewhere.

E. R. Skulmoski

Omen in Sapphics

Corridor of light spills over the wet grass
while a clot of clouds oozes over you, hiding
your face, like bouquets of snakes tumbling downhill.
Everything has turned

black, except for the occasional wind that
grates my face, the nameless birds that sing your praise.
But last Friday while we were driving on the
highway towards the

lake, something lay mangled like wet hair caked a-
round a drain — a skunk disemboweled on the
road, the way a psalm sings will you forget me
O Lord, forever.

Found Footage of the Concubine in Judges 19

1

Television static ripples across the screen
a blue wave covers the crevice of her limbs
and congeals the black and white twisted grains.
Her shadow jumps across the glossy screen

from one spot to the next. By the time my hands reach
her hair she disappears into another corner,
sinking into the pothole he swerves to avoid.
A deer dents the headlights, a mountain decomposes,
her severed hand dangles on the back of his donkey
next to the barley and new wine. The moon, decapitated,
is tangled in a thornbush.
His eyes clouded by the foam in her mouth
petrify the stagnant water trapped in glass,
replaying over and over in a God-ordained glitch.
He forgets why she is parcelled in his hands wrapped in plastic.

Here, God falls behind the television set among candy wrappers and balls of cat hair.

2

A levite[1] lacked milk and bread. A bucket for release. The sweetness of figs and honey.

God didn't cut it anymore.

As she roams under the mountain shadows, he sees her
— lost sheep, stray dog, lucky penny by the storm drain.
He does his angel thing,
catching hold of her like strands of melted plastic. Cue romantic music.

3

She holds him up to the light only to find
holes leaking deceit running down from his beard
to his feet, wilting grass wherever he walks.

Enough, she says. and goes back to her father's house
Though not so fast the translators say
She was a harlot for doing that.

4

It didn't take him long to miss
having a release bucket
on command, he goes to fetch her
like a stick in the forest.

5

The husband drinks too much and the clot
of her father's laughter multiplies like a tumor.
Be merry, drink, be merry, drink more and stay, says her father.
Happiness coils around the tip of his fingers
when he squeezes her tight.

6

Night curdles the landscape into masses of lumps
along the nerves of the highway swelling in pockets
of every dark corner. Moonlight pries open the doorway
of the sky, a veil of stars obscured by meandering
at night for a place to stay.

7

Can you tell the difference between the skull of a good man and the skull of an evil one?
Look through the sockets for once. Hold a jawbone to your ear.

On Instagram, a man in khakis shows his collection of human spines in
under one minute.

8

They want him. They want him. They want him bad
so her master takes her by the hair and throws her into their mouths
as the YouTube algorithm recommends video after video
of mealworms time-lapsing their way into a watermelon,
honeycomb, and fish bones.

9

The deformed night soaks itself in laughter and a handful of winces.
She oozes out the bottom of her foot into a swimming pool.
In the water, she becomes an imitation of the night sky.
She watches herself divide kaleidoscopically into microplastic beads on
the back of broken shards.
Her body splits open to let moonlight refract in multiple angles.

10

Morning light bleaches scraps of blown tires on the highway,
and the flattened cat on the side of the road.
She collapses with her hands on the threshold.
He says, hey let's go home. She doesn't answer him.

11

God is tight-lipped now that the sky is sewn shut.
Trees stand with broken fingers lust for purpose and direction.
Mountains fade out.

1. A man who cuts animals to burn in God's house. ↩

E. R. Skulmoski lives in the Interior of British Columbia with her husband and four children. Her work has been published in *Vita Poetica*, *Barely South Review*, and *Voice & Verse*, among others.

POETRY

Emma McCoy

Jonah

Deep Cove, British Columbia

It was easier to cross
the border than I thought:
drive up, ditch the car,
bus straight through Seattle
and the Peace Arch and into
Canada. It will be different
here. The water is so blue
I am drenched in it, the air
so clean I take a full breath,
the sea's horizon somewhere
around the corner. There,
I will be safe. No one will
want anything of me. I will
be free from weighted eyes
and a listing heart, uneven,
trapped, waterlogged.

I tighten my pack straps
and read the signs: kayak
rentals by the hour, ice cream
in ten flavors, deep-sea fishing
charters, passage by boat
to the wild Yukon.

See, I can be just as relentless.
There's not a cloud in the sky.

Emma McCoy (M.A.) has two poetry books: *This Voice Has an Echo* (Solum Press, 2024) and *In Case I Live Forever* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). She's been published in places like *Vast Chasm Magazine*, *Stirring Literary,* and *Across the Margin.* She's the operations editor of *Vessels of Light* and reads for *Whale Road Review*. Catch her on Substack: https://poetrybyemma.substack.com/

POETRY

Enobong O'wunmi

Awaken My Heart

"What if I became heartless?" I asked myself,
"No heartbeat. No worries. No pain?"
With trembling hands, I tore my shirt open
Reached inside the sac and pulled out my heart.
I set it on the table.
It sputtered. I tried to calm it. It splattered.

I packed up my heart, teeth gritted.
To the sea I went.
I dumped the red-blooded thing in a shell.
It sank to the bottom.
It feels good to be heartless!
I went home with glee.

Days passed.
A hardened layer formed around my hollow sac.
My strength waned.
My body failed.
Guilt pricked.
My insides ragged.
I'm heartless! My eyes wailed.

Taunts raged from within and without,
You heartless soul
You will not live one more day
The grave waits tonight!

A lone voice cried,
"Bring back the heart."

I went to the sea,
scoured the blue surface.
There the shell was, but my heart was not.
Search teams went out.
Divers plunged deep and wide.
None found it.

They gave up; I did not.
Many days, I lived by the sea,
Calling. Pleading. Crying.
"Oh, my dear heart,
Return to me."
Only echoes answered.

One bright morning,
I found my heart
Pale, stinky, and mushed up.
I scooped it. It slipped out of my fingers.
I shovelled it into a bag, and raced home.
I wrapped it in plasters, placed it in the sac.

"Live again, Live!" I tapped my chest.
Blood flow, life flow, fill the veins
But the heart lay still, unyielding.
I fought for many nights
To hear a beat
And to feel a pulse.

I gazed into the heavens.

My voice pierced the skies.
Awaken my heart, Father.
Please, reach in.
Fix my insides.
Restore my heart, make it new.
Let life flow through me.
Yeshua, Lord, have mercy on me.

Suddenly I heard
A rhythm. A beat,
Thump. Pump
Thump. Pump
Bump. Dump
Bump. Dump
In. Out.
In. Out.
My chest thumped.
My heart pumped.
I jumped and hummed
To the beat of love
To the sounds of life.

Controlling Heart

Only the small screen was lit
All else lay in darkness
The chimes called out to me
Into my most cherished room.
A lone chair at the centre;
I buried myself in the control seat
Control pads fastened to my palms

My fingers drummed on every button
"A win. A win. Go, go for the ... No!"
At every miss, I struck the screen
How long had I played? I could not tell
Outside, the clouds shifted from
White to dark, and white again
Day and night danced in the sky.
Grey gathered on my crown
My fingers stiffened and curled
Locked inside the control seat
Yet not one victory recorded
"Why, oh why?"
Thick tears rolled down my face.

Then a light broke in a corner of the room,
A Mighty Being approached
Light veiled His face
A two-edged sword flashed from His mouth
Falling to my knees
I clutched His feet
Drenching them with tears,
With the control pads bound to my hands
I looked up, my teeth chattering
"*I Am Here,*" He bellowed.
He bent low,
Reaching to free me from the pads.
I clutched them tightly
"No ... this is my life, my strength,
My time, my everything!"
The pads snapped out of my grip
Into His hands they went
"Stay clear of the control room."

He led me out into another room
And placed a tiny book in my hands
I sat on a soft couch and read until
My head dropped in His palms.

Enobong O'wunmi is a poet and storyteller who tells faith-filled, redemptive, humorous, and evocative poems and stories. Her writing is shaped by a burning desire to see families restored and nations transformed. She is the author of two collections of short stories and some poetry collections. Enobong is a devoted wife and mother of two lovely daughters. Find Enobong's works on her blog.

Ericka Clay

HYDRANT

My heart is charged
from their full-range
fire,
a desolate prairie
sparked into flame
like the moment
You blinked
and the world
was alight.

But how do I take
their combative
energy combusting
cellularly within
a body not made
to sustain this
ever-present age?

It's evil, like breath
on a neck,
knife to a vein.

But then again,
You slow and steady,
out of time
and removed

from my heartache —
sure beacon,
sure hydrant —
overflowing
and extinguishing
all I can't
handle.

River

The river flows
like your mornings
and evenings,
the first steps
of your baby,
like the beating
of his heart
and yours
and the cortisol
that wearies
your heart
and burdens
your veins,
like the words
you never said
to your mother
before she died
or the thoughts
that came, wicked
in, wicked out,
on the darkest of days

when no one was there
to hear you scream
and like all the evil,
that outside drum
reverberating against your inner
ear — bad men and politics and rapes
and murders and all the horrendous
horror that started with Cain.

But also like the peace that overcomes
it, His peace He gives freely as you
sail unheeded on your raft, floating
and flourishing to forever.

Ericka Clay writes raw, real, relatable poetry that points to Jesus. You can find her books at erickaclay.com.

POETRY

Jenni Marie Van Horn

Mother

I.
That evening, Mother cried for her unborn, her expectation
exiled, one buried beneath the bramble fence. Grief-heaving,
she gazed out the door, far past where her own leaving
would take her, down the long, long road ahead.

Did she name herself Bitter after the fruit fell
prematurely from her hand like the egg
cuckoo-cast-out? Did her sobs reach the clay
cracked beneath her feet just for a hacked-short,

withered-before-it-tillered crop? I know she cultivated
callouses with the perennial patching up of clothes
thistle-torn, weed-worn. And this nightly vigil at the door –
this time she breathed the breathing of one who pushes out
her stillborn.

Still, in the hush unfurled before the dark
she may have heard her name called from the furrowed field
and stealing across her heart with a fledgling Phoenix wing,
the promise, "Because she was the mother of all the living."

II.
How many times on the way to Bethlehem did Mother recall
her second christening? Blessed, but back aching. Blessed, but
ankles thick, hips like half-rent hinges, and then that evening,

when the door was shut against her as final as a tombstone

closing out the light, leaving her on the wrong side in the dusk,
surely the pregnancy hormones kicked back, pounded
the blood through her swollen veins, and surely the dust
on her cheeks was shining where her tears made lanes.

III.
This morning, I'm red-eyed in the garden returning
to the list of names, ungiven, in my notebook, and listening
to the dusky flycatcher stuttering songs in the empty street,
and I'm waiting for what comes after the old, old question,

"Woman, why do you weep?"

Jenni is from the west coast of Canada but has spent years working in East Africa. She has a background in medieval literature and linguistics, rarely writes a poem without reference to birds, and is currently editing a very overdue collection of poems following her own journey with secondary infertility. Substack: @jennimarievanhorn

POETRY

John Grey

Early December

With its brown grass, dead flowers,
leafless trees, the scene before me
is of one giant scar.

What did this?
The drop in temperature?
The wind from the north?
Sadly, it looks as if
the landscape did this to itself ...
killed off its greenery,
and, like some hidebound religious sect,
slayed anything that dared flaunt color.

What choice do I have
but to go back inside,
close the door behind me,
light the fire,
close the curtains,
turn average living space
into a haven of extreme coziness.

Outside, the world is practicing
the art of falling apart.
Inside, the hearth is ablaze.
And, unexpectedly, friends arrive.

The fire whispers,
stay warm, stay close.

Worldview

I sure did envy those astronauts,
the ones who saw Earth from space.
Forget the moon, that chunk of lifeless rock.
And even the pictures they sent back.
They're just awe, once removed.

I've always longed to spend a day
in some steel cocoon,
orbiting this planet,
seeing the maps come to life,
the oceans, the continents,
interwoven like quilt patterns,
hosts to everything living.
I might even feel a little godlike.

But then, there'd be this other view —
the place I come from,
its ragged beauty all aglow.
And yet a mere ball rolling
through endless space,
an outpost of people
struggling to make sense of it,
survive in it.

And I'd be just one of them.
Not such a god after all.
Give myself some distance,
and I could come back newly human.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Willow Review* and the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*. Latest books, *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters* and *Between Two Fires* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *MacGuffin*, *Touchstone* and *Plainsongs*.

Justin Hollis

[UNTITLED]

My flight to Rome, where I am scheduled to lecture, is cancelled at the last minute. Luckily, the woman at the ticket counter owes me a favor. She secures me a spot on a later flight, a straight shot into Vatican City. When I board, I realize all the other passengers are nuns. I worry they'll be judgmental of my secular views and dismissive attitude towards organized religion. But I soon fall into an easy conversation with the young nun seated next to me. Faith, she explains, is not a blind surrendering to an unknown, but an intellectual gamble arrived at after a lifetime of struggling with doubt. "A calculated leap into mystery continuously opening up before you." I'm not completely won over, though I have to agree that when looked at in this way, the issue is more complex than I'd thought. The six-hour flight breezes past in amiable exchange, when the captain announces we are approaching the drop zone. *Drop zone?* The plane is on a direct course *over* Rome, the young nun tells me, moving up the aisle to help the other nuns secure their parachutes. "If you want to make your engagement, you'll have to jump. Call it a 'calculated leap,'" she says, as though to convince me, and buckles me into the plane's only spare, which is so ragged and beaten up it looks like it could have been a holdover from the First World War. Her smile is serene, yet telling, as if this had been her plan all along.

Justin Hollis has an MFA from Hofstra University and currently teaches language and literature at Palm Beach State College. His work has appeared previously in *Action, Spectacle, Pioneer Town*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Eunoia Review, GAS: Poetry, Art and Music*, *ANTAE*, *Midcult*,* and *The Chiron Review*, amongst others. His debut collection, *Ferrying the Stars,* is published by Half Inch Press.

POETRY

Victoria Rose Kopishke

Teacher

— after John 13:13

Was He like my fourth-grade English teacher
who always watched to the end of the credits
no matter how long it took the names
to scroll up the screen,

who valued the work of the key grip
as much as craft service consultant,
the costume designer's assistant's assistant
as well as the colorist, SFX, superstars,

every cast and crew member maybe someone
she once knew or taught — maybe, one day,
one of us — showing us how many hands
it takes to make art?

Or was He closer to my theatre teacher,
the cool one, with the contagious laugh,
covered in sawdust from building sets,
always, always making something —
whose only desire upon retiring
was to *go north and put his hands in the dirt?*

Surely, He's most like my undergrad professor
who thought we all shouldn't take it so seriously —

the pressure, that is — but hold sacred the spirit
of our craft — who knew ancient languages, translated
farces, whose tall tales unveiled the God's-honest truth.

Though one day I hissed at him, *Teacher, do you not care?*
like any hopeless hopeful trying to excel
at simply everything, what I really meant
was *Who do You say that i am?* He invited me in

to his office, the place he'd prepared for me,
where we sat in silence for however long it took
me to unfold, and opening his hands, all
compassion, as ever, asked, *Do you want to be made well?*

Victoria Rose Kopishke is an MFA candidate in DeSales University's Creative Writing program. Her poems appear in *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*, *Platform Review*, and "Metaphorically Speaking" (Quillkeepers Press). She holds a B.A. in Theatre, English, and Secondary Education from DeSales, and an M.A. in Theatre from Villanova University.

POETRY

Kimberly Phinney

The Golden Hour

Go, stand
and gaze
at the edge
of day, before the ink bleeds in.
The very air is a patinaed bronze.
Clouds, like Greek amphoras resting end to end,
are an ethereal golden ember we are breathing in —
and they shade the sky and land
with dripping honey-fire,
glowing a cornucopia of light.

We blink
our eyes
to changes
as the illumination fades, giving way
to the coming cover of dusk —
But if I squint my eyes just so,
as it goes, goes, goes,
I can still make out an impressionistic print —
like a Monet or van Gogh,
to carry with me through the dark.

"Come close —
breathe in
every stroke,"

the Earth beckons. So, I listen to her plea.
This golden hour is a masterpiece,
lost to the ashes of time each night.
But God will repaint this bounty tomorrow —
and every day thereafter —
just like he does with our very lives.

Trust Fall

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.
– 1 Corinthians 13-12

I.

The gladiola sings red
into the dusky spring sky —
splitting air like firelight —
and I wonder to myself:
When was the last time I was
this alive?

The magnolia blooms white
amidst the sky's blackened drape —
dancing on the grave of night —
and I wonder to myself:
When was the last time I was
this full of hope?

II.

And now, I recall a scene:
I saw a grass frog leap once
from atop our old oak tree.
He flew through the air in such
assurance that he'd survive
(soaring without scarcity)
that his faith convicted me:
Lord, when was the last time I
trusted you with my life?

III.

I can finally see it now:
We can never be sure of
these vast mysteries — for we
stare through a mirror dimly —
but we can be sure God leaves
his poetry inside all
created things:

like scrolls of parchment stuffed in
blue glass bottles out at sea
(no less true in years of loss)
waiting, just waiting, to be
found — then uncorked and unrolled —
waiting, just waiting, to be
read with His Glory *writ large*.

So, until we're face-to-face,
we must trust what's been revealed

to us through God's messengers.
They sing if we are listening:
Blind reason is a treason
that often ends in doubt, but
a child's faith is a wonder
that's not childish at all.

Kimberly Phinney is a professor and founder of TheWayBack2Ourselves.com. Her writing is featured in *Christianity Today, Solum,* and *Inkwell,* among others. Her poetry collections, *Of Wings and Dirt* and *Exalted Ground,* were bestsellers. Her poetry is Pushcart-nominated and has won several awards. She's currently writing a book on art and faith with Baker Books.

POETRY

Danielle Page

Vessel

Belly as round and smooth as freshly blown glass,
the girl swells with each breath taken toward her.
Expanded, she is formed and forming, a furnace of promise.

Yet, she is malleable. Every encounter with the flames is brought
down to the temperature of earth. Slowly, stretch marks
etch in the weight of accusation, each crack of rejection
sinks into the surface.

It is there she cries to be remade in glory.
It is there she reflects the path of creation,
the light of a thousand suns in her willing eyes.

Gather Ye Wood While Ye May

I gather the wood—
simple scraps in my longing to stay in this forest.
Twigs as an offering to the pile You are forming.
I look around for more to see a log frame,
handcrafted and with great toil and
I dare not disassemble it.

I know the dirt is bare here,
how brittle the branches
and how fruitless and fragile
the forest floor is.
Yet, I stay.

I prepare small bundles,
wrap them together with woven braids
and tentatively ask if it is enough.
Another crack. Another branch falls
from decay and I leave it there,
hoping you will call these skeleton trees
back to life and give them new flesh.
I watch as it crumbles to dust
and still I slowly gather.

Solvitur Ambulado

I circle the forest,
the paths I have tread
to form a labyrinth in
these ghosted woods,
in search of spring
in the February dead.

A halo of heat courses
through me and out,
leaving behind melted
snow and charred dirt.

Where is the water
to extinguish my
heart inflamed?
Or to feed the fuel
of (com)passion I once
carried—
now flick-ering
and fading?

Danielle Page is a truth-teller, mother, educator, and writer currently hailing from rural Maryland. She strives to live wholeheartedly in her endeavors alongside her husband and daughters. You can find her writing here and there, as well as the *Clayjar Review*'s Substack.

Cody Adams

ROADKILL

Tatters of black garbage bags
wave "Hello" to me from
thorny thicket along
my asphalt driveway.
The bags are casualties of divine
brawl I recycle into ponchos
for my children who insist on
treating lightning bolts like limbo
sticks, and shadows like pools
of demon blood they can walk atop.
I cast the shadows off their rubber
soles, into herds of hickory smoked
bacon sleeping in plastic caskets,
begging for my cast iron smackdown.

My kids are dry and full and awfully fearless.

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

POETRY

Lance Hutson

Worms

The children swing upon their playset,
back and forth.
They giggle and talk
in their own little ways.

They race toward the slide:
down they go.
They debate who was fastest
in their own little ways.

Beneath it all, do they know?
There's worms in that dirt.
Their bare feet padding atop soft clover,
but worms are burrowing ever deeper.

There's so many worms in that dirt.
They wriggle and chew their paths
through thick clots of age-old soil.
The children laugh. The worms dig.

They live unseen until a storm.
As rain floods the weedy grass,
the worms erupt from below,
revealing themselves in writhing strands.

God, how could there be so many?

I knew they were there,
but I left them alone.
I let them multiply in the dirt.

How awful those worms are.
Pink, wet strings squirming in filth.
Why did I let them thrive?
I fed them while the children slept.

My yard's infested with these vile things,
but my shovel's clean in the garage.
I hear their constant gnawing.
There's worms in that dirt.

My children laugh and call my name:
around they chase.
They run and jump and laugh,
and I smile and cheer them on.

In the Still Silence

In the still silence, I sit with my thoughts. My office is dark. The magnolia scratches the siding. Children sleep. A distant TV still plays their show; it's unaware the audience has gone home.

In the still silence, I sigh deeply, staring at my journal pages. If only my wife knew the garden I keep. The roots tangle and weeds strangle. All my labors produce more knots, and I stomp on fresh buds. The Gardener steadies my feet, leans down, and plucks carefully. The knots are untied, life regained.

In the still silence, my prayers sprout, grow, and multiply until the rains slow and the well dries. I weep in dust. The Gardener hears. He

sees the hot sweat rolling across my brow. He shares His water and carries me toward shade. He calls the wind and I find relief.

In the still silence, I watch leaves wither and hills transform. I open the window, smelling sharp wood smoke. My harvest was meager. I want to put down the rake and barrow. I sit beneath barren trees and ask the Gardener why. He takes my hands and places them on the barrow. I cannot abandon the field.

In the still silence, snow falls quietly. The sun hides away. The deep grey reminds me of my own bones. The garden is bare, lifeless, and I have nothing to show. I sip my coffee, blanket across my lap, and I wonder where the Gardener goes when fields are dead and time slows. He enters and sits down next to me. His warmth is pleasant compared to the cool, thin walls and cold-paned window. I have no words for Him, but He nods and settles in.

The Lone Wolf

The forest is quiet. The slight breeze bears no scent; it's stale. Leaves fall, puddling on the dirt floor. They're teased, tossed, and scattered further. Creaking trees mumble in the valley. The mountain walls hold back the encroaching darkness. The sparrows have departed and no deer remain to pant for still waters. There are no clouds: just a dimming sun that dangles at dusk. Day will not leave. Night refuses to arrive.

The lone wolf limps about. It paws at dust. No hunt to be had: it's all dust and leaves. Dry twigs will be its only solace today.

Tree branch ribs ripple beneath the thin fur. The lone wolf spits a sharp tooth into an abandoned hole. It surveys the four corners and nothing has gathered. It whimpers. If it could climb higher, it would. If it could cast bone lots on shoreline shale, perhaps the mystery of current suffering would be unveiled. All is silent. The curtain remains steadfast; it's not been torn.

A hawk flies overhead but does not slow.

Crunching bird bone scraps in this wilderness would be a king's feast. The lone wolf hacks and vomits thick blood clots onto a withered thornbush. There's damage somewhere; it's more than this lone wolf can understand. It desperately scratches at the lukewarm dirt. No scent. No life. No night. No dreams. No relief. It debates returning to the carrion of yesterdays. How many times can it lick the bones for food?

The lone wolf raises its head toward heaven and howls. It suddenly gags and heaves: its cry is rejected. If tears could form, they'd be a river. Maybe fish would swim once more, the deer drink freely, and the bear wildly splash. The tears have been removed too soon. Stones are now the river's fish. The fields are barren. The caves are abandoned. The wolf's den is filled with familiar bones it cannot leave. Even the comforting scent they once carried has fled.

The lone wolf longs for something it cannot comprehend. Another racking coughing fit pummels its chest. The blood dribbles from parched lips, and the lone wolf resumes its hopeless pawing at the dust of creation.

Lance Hutson is a husband, father, and CPA from West Virginia. His work centers on fatherhood, faith, struggle, and home.

POETRY

S.C. Sams

In the middle of the day

still in bed shrouded by agony I worked toward silence
in the false night three days after pain encompassed my brain,
relentless and uncaring. The dark was illuminated by imitation light;
the brightness turned all the way down with sunglasses on my face
and the computer screen still like 100 suns searing
my too sensitive retina.

I hoped against hope and pleaded my God
why have you forsaken me?

It makes sense when I start to question my existence,
placing myself in the bed of forever-a-victim,
I start to question His existence because I am desperate

to join my daughters in the separate family rooms in which they wait,
their delicate hands gathering pieces of themselves from hardwood
floors, pieces I helped fracture out of the wholeness of them
with my cruel unwholeness.

False dark begins to cling to my soul
and the endless faux night goes on for so long —
for so long I forget I exist except for between lines
uttered so long ago by a man whose anguish

my own will never meet. I cling to those lines
in my mind and repeat them again and again,

convinced one man understands invisible agony and
hallowed be His name.

S.C. Sams is a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Western Colorado University studying Nature Writing. She was a middle-school math teacher and once lived on a fishing boat in Southeast Alaska for 25 days. She is an emerging writer.

POETRY

Sara Etgen-Baker

Christ in the Ruins

The night comes down like iron,
cold on my shoulders,
pressing its verdict into bone.

I walk through the ruins of myself ~
rooms gutted by old hungers,
mirrors cracked from staring too long
at my own small griefs.

Every shadow hisses
its familiar gospel of failure.
I almost believe them.

Then ~
a thin gold seam
splits the rubble.
Not loud.
Not triumphant.
Just steady.

Christ steps through the fracture,
dust rising around His feet
like surrendered ghosts.

He does not flinch
at the wreckage.

He touches the broken lintel
as if it were a beloved brow.

My darkness folds inward,
ash collapsing into ash ~
and still His light
keeps blooming
in the hollows.

I stand there,
ruined and radiant,
a house on fire
with mercy.

Sara Etgen-Baker is an educator and a freelance writer who just recently began actively pursuing her writing dreams. She's written a collection of memoir vignettes, a collection of poems, and a novel. Her writing has appeared in both online and print publications including *Good Old Days Magazine*, various *Guidepost's* magazines and books, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

POETRY

Sarah Watkins

Future, present, past

On the grand stone steps, he asks if I could love the city. The mammoth shuttlecocks on the lawn are pale white, noses toward the ground like orange-headed sheep. I can't say I could love it, so I just sigh. I think perhaps I could grow to see it as a mother does a calf-level Sharpie stain: a time capsule in location form. I am sure we will stay, and sure I will be able to say I am alright for now.

•

Perched on the bench edge
considering the 1500s Christ,
I have knees for haunches.

•

I erase last week's aphorism. I can't find any good quotes for my whiteboard that week, though — none a fourteen-year-old would care to consider. *The future starts today, not tomorrow. It is incredibly empowering to know the future is in your hands.* Neither resonates with me. I begin the countdown to the end of the school year. My students often correct me — *we have twenty-four days left, not twenty; eighteen, not fourteen*. I never change it, because I can't. I have come to believe it is a falling and a trusting.

Cure

What's the difference between guilt and shame
and conviction? The question she asks the group

is met with silence, awkward shifts. The answer is simple, apparently:
Conviction is from the Spirit, shame is from the Devil.

(If that's true, I am tormented as in Hell,
though I think they are giving the Devil too much credit.

I do a well-enough job tormenting myself,
replaying the images in my mind of the sharp knife,

that sickness deep in my mind's thighs
for which I shackle my hands and swallow the key,

then dig through my excrement to find it again.)
I know now that I am here,

sifting for a cure through bleary eyes across the pages of Truth:
shame drives me inward, hands the ton-heavy key to me,

and hisses when I cannot hold it.

Conviction is a realization that I am on the ground
surrounded by my mess, realizing my sickness is man's,

my fixing cannot fix, my being needed is not necessary,
realizing His holey hand is extended toward me

and will never recoil from my touch.

An Arkansas native, **Sarah Watkins** is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has been featured in over 80 publications, including *The Uncommon GRACkle*, *The Clayjar Review*, and *engine(idling*. Instagram: @sarahwatkinspoetry

Aaron J. Connor

Gethsemane

The beginning and the end
Dance on a needle point, hand in
Hand, invisible, but the weight is felt
Like the moment before the tower bell
Is struck. You stand in the rose garden,
With dead leaves and torn bits
Of loose paper blowing in the wind.
The last whispers of heat dissipate
In the air of late autumn.
Meet me at the well, says
The whisper in the wind.
Meet me at the well

Gravity

A down feather floats down
as a wing climbs up, clawing
at the atmosphere choked blue
by the distance.
I watch
from my porch, screened in
to keep out the buzzing riff-raff,
and I drop another sugar cube
into my now tepid coffee

with a thick plunk. Then,
I raise the cup to my lips.
I think
of the day ahead. First, I have
to pick up my dry cleaning. Then,
I have
to bury you,
lower you
into the ground and throw on some
dead dirt, no good for gardening.
Then groceries, I guess.
I think of all
the promises of life and afterlife.
I lift up my eyes with the sun.

Aaron J. Connor is a graduate of the University of Florida and currently works as a full-time youth minister and part-time stagehand in Gainesville, Florida. He has been previously published by *Tea Lit* and *PHIL LIT Journal*. When not writing poetry, he can be found trying (and failing) to learn how to play slap bass or indulging his coffee addiction. Instagram: @ajc.poems Substack: @aaronjconnor

Sarah G. Pouliot

Preparing for the Estate Sale

In the heat of June,
Mom and I clean out
what you left behind:

S&H Green Stamps, flour sack curtains,
circled Sears catalogs, and eclectic glasses
from cereal and detergent boxes.

We sift through costume clip-ons,
saved tissues, Grandpa's volunteer
firefighter suit, and Hershey wrappers
hoarded under floorboards.

"He was a diabetic in denial,"
Mom smiles, with a handful
of crumpled aluminum foil.
"And I guess Grandma
never found his stash."

Sitting next to avalanching piles
of embroidered towels and dairy bottles,
I think about my unborn children
categorizing all I own.

Would I care if they donated
that rocking chair

I thrifted in my twenties?
Or discarded
the tarnished hoops I wore
before you gifted me gold?

What do you keep
when there are no instructions?
Only faulty memories
of which dishes were set
at Thanksgiving, and the dress
sewn for my Christening.

The county dump
is a mountainside of time,
a clock with no hands,
the half-melted face of a Barbie
pressed against a bald tire.

Here, I am a beetle,
bathing in the promise
of the windowsill,
as the fly swatter swings
like a pendulum on its nail.

In my dreams, I slip in
through the side door,
unnoticed, and you're there —

hunched in the kitchen light,
kneading flour and lard, rolling
out the crust, while you hum hymns
of what was lost, then found

Sarah G. Pouliot: Hailing from Titusville, Florida, and studying poetics abroad at the University of Oxford, Sarah's writing seeks to capture what it means to be human — from the extraordinary to the mundane. You can read more of her work at *Saw Palm*, *Cagibi*, *Timber*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Ekstasis*, and *Relief*.

FICTION

FICTION

A.N. Barros

Of Weeds and Gardens

It started as a weed. Perhaps it came from my neighbor's yard; a little of their chaos spreading into my own. Perhaps it fell from a seed I still held in my pocket. Empty promises to myself of throwing it away before it was sown. My garden was green, fruitful, and growing. Not as large as I would have liked it or, honestly, how it should be had I cared for it more diligently. I tend to it daily, mostly with vigor, but often with synchronized motions so that I might get to my rest sooner. It demands so much of my precious time.

I remember the day I saw it creeping from the ground. No larger than a finger, dark and scraggly, pointing a crooked way to the west. The sight of it exhausted me. How dare you, little weed, impede upon my garden I have worked so hard on. Well, mostly. My garden produces fruit and sustenance, though not in groves. I am most proud of the few fruit trees I have been able to grow. I look forward to each harvest, the juicy first bite, and the overflowing baskets of produce. There is always enough for me and even some to share with my neighbors.

Tomorrow, thought I. *I will deal with you tomorrow*. There was a nagging in my mind, as if to say, "No you won't. You are curious to see what it will grow into." I was. Though another thought also took root — what if it infects my garden in some way? I tossed this thought aside too quickly. What weeds have truly overcome a whole garden in a single day?

I will get to it tomorrow and see what it is made of then. How its roots look. What resistance it might give when I pull it.

***

It is next week, and I still haven't made it around to pulling the invasive plant. It has surely grown and expanded in a way that is both familiar yet uncanny. Instead of growing upwards towards the sun like most plants, it crawls along the ground, reaching for the healthy growth around it.

I peer over at my neighbor's garden. It's full of the little plant pests. I should have known. The dark, thorny vines spreading through her garden are exactly what she has let spread into mine. She should have been more diligent.

I see the way the vines snake, the way they coil around the fruit like prey. It's no wonder she doesn't share from her garden. Her fruit, what little there is, struggles to grow. Instead of ripening, it's as if the fruit chooses to move straight to the decomposition stage. Right there on the plant. Fascinating.

***

It's been a handful of tomorrows. The mere sight of the growing weed saps my energy yet fuels the guilt I feel for ignoring its proliferation. I water my garden, but I have grown lazy in tending to it. There are other weeds now. But none like the first, now violently spreading. How did it make it to my fruit-bearing trees so quickly? What's to be done?

***

Today is the day. I don my garden gloves and step into my neglected garden. The invasive vining creature taunts me as I watch it, day by day, choking more of my beautiful plants. The vegetables, the flowers, the fruit — I water them, but they still seem dry, ill, or perhaps sad? The weed is a weed no longer. Instead, a thorny, reaching bush of spindly tentacles. A dark kraken infecting my fertile soil. Almost beautiful in its own terrifying way.

I position my feet, grab hold of the trunk of the vile creature, and pull. My muscles strain in an unpracticed way as I get down to my knees and try pulling again. When was the last time I pulled weeds? When was the last time I knelt in the soil like this?

Then there is pain. I stare down at the blood beginning to darken spots on my gloves where the thorns have stabbed through. This isn't working.

I'm digging in the shed for my shears when I feel eyes on me. It's my neighbor looking over her fence.

"That won't get rid of it," she says.

"I can at least try." I have to do something. It's taking over my garden, destroying my fruit, leaving me with nothing to eat, let alone share.

"Go ahead." Her glare is unamused.

"What about your garden?"

She looks out over her desolated produce. "It protects it," she counters.

I peer into her yard to discover her meaning, and I see the way the thorny hands cradle her shriveled plants. I look back on my side of the fence to

compare: my vines have not quite covered my plants yet. But they are not healthy. “How is your fruit doing?” I ask her, still curious.

“It’s edible,” she says. “But the protection produces fruit as well.”

The *protection*? It’s then that I notice something in her hand — a large, oblong berry with what looks like an ashen shell on it. Does she actually eat that thing? “Is it good?” I ask.

“It’s edible,” she repeats. She bites into the fruit with a loud crunch I can feel in my bones even though a fence separates us.

The disgust must be showing on my face because she rolls her eyes as she smacks on the crackling fruit.

Even so, my disgust intrigues me. “Do you mind if I try yours? You know, to see if I want to keep mine.”

It’s her turn to paint her face with disgust. “You have your own.” She points to my garden, and I follow her reaching gaze to see the same toxic fruit sprouting from one of the tentacle vines.

That can’t be.

I approach my now-thriving kraken-weed. Did it grow more as I was talking? How did I miss this when I was so close to the thing, trying to pull it from its roots?

Before I reach out to pluck the fruit, the smell of rotting flesh hits me. Is it the fruit? The plant? I look around to discover the source when a pile of fur catches my eye. It’s one of the rabbits I’ve had to shoo out of my

vegetables before. The long, gnawing teeth bulge from its maggot-ridden mouth, frozen in a scream, and I feel bile rising in my gut.

Beside it lies a heap of blackened mold, the remains of what I think was a tomato. I look at the hunkering tomato plants, overwhelmed by the vining infection — all of my tomatoes are, in fact, rotting right on the vine.

Something like panic grips my heart. It wasn't like that yesterday. I didn't mean to. This is not what I want.

"What's going ..." my voice trails as I turn to my neighbor, who is no longer there.

What do I do? How did I let this happen?

My panic turns to rage as I swing at the weed-fruit with my shears, and it bursts like an overripe watermelon. A sticky syrup drools from the busted fruit, and I'm overwhelmed by the sickly sweet smell burning my nose. I look down at the fruit flesh on my clothes and realize the smell of rot was not coming from the decomposing bunny or rotting tomatoes. The bile is now in my mouth, and I fold over, hands on knees, and stare at the spinning ground.

Tears prick my eyes, and I'm unsure if it is from grief or the rotting corpse smell I'm now emanating. I fall to my knees in despair.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the plants, to the soil, to the wind.

I don't expect an answer, and I don't try to suppress the hopelessness washing over me.

I just sit there and spend more time in the garden that day than I have in weeks. My grief and guilt are a sharp contrast to the joy of the harvest I was looking forward to. Will I taste of my favorite fruits again?

I lament the little time I gave to pruning and caring. Always ready for the reward of the harvest but slacking in the work it takes to enjoy it.

I'm not sure how much time passed. How long I knelt, grasping the grass with shaking hands, and listening to the rustle of the wind through the garden's foliage.

***

The world is entering the orange glow of sunset when I hear the wind reply to my mourning. A single word caresses my ear.

Abide.

The quiet, still voice revives in me the memory of joy in the work, of warm muscles tending tender plants, of dirty hands cleansing overrun soil, of quiet moments observing the way the sunlight filters down to the fertile ground. My garden holds it all — bone-weary work, bountiful harvest, and yet bone-deep rest.

These memories bring with them hope. A hope that strengthens my weary legs so that I can stand.

I am ready to wield my pruning shears. I am ready to abide in the Garden.

To toil, to till, to tarry there in joy.

A.N. Barros is a medieval scholar and teacher with a love for Jesus and storytelling in all its forms. She lives in Texas with her husband, three children, and a multitude of plants and animals.

FICTION

Janille Stephens

The Indelible Cross of Christ

Chris had come to Boston at twenty-two with a *heart for mission* and a cross tattoo on the soft side of his wrist. Pastor Pete and Chairman of the Church Planting Committee Jack had given him a map of Boston with the Allston neighborhood highlighted, then put him on a plane. They'd told him to walk the Allston streets and pray for the people while contemplating *the movement of the Spirit in Allston* and discerning *God's plan for the city of Boston*.

Chris had done these things. He'd spent months in coffee shops and city streets and riding the Green Line, contemplating and discerning all the while. And eventually his contemplation and discernment led him to realize that "the Spirit" was, in fact, not moving at all. That "God" did not, in fact, have a plan. Not for Boston or for anywhere else. Not for the Ivy Leaguers or the drunks. Not now and not before.

His twenty-third birthday found him having a difficult phone conversation with Pete and Jack, a conversation which ended with Chris declining their offer — in the politest way he could manage, which wasn't very polite at all — to pray for him.

His first problem post-delusion was the tattoo. This was solved easily enough by eight new T-shirts with sleeves that stretched nearly to his knuckles and reliably hid the underside of his wrist.

The second problem was more complicated. There was very little work in Boston for an atheistic twenty-something with a *Certificate of Gospel Preaching* from an unaccredited Bible college in Kansas. There was also very little money in Chris's bank account.

There was, however, a Bruegger's Bagels near his apartment. Chris applied for a job. He was granted one. It was fine, except for the franchise-wide policy that required employees to wear their shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow at all times. As Chris stood behind the plastic sneeze guard spreading cream cheese — original, chive and onion, cinnamon, or jalapeño — over toasted bagels — wheat, whole wheat, multi-wheat, sesame, or original — the underside of his wrist flashed in and out of view, giving the chattier customers a glimpse into his embarrassing and very much *over*, thank you very much, past.

"So you're a Christian?" said a business-y looking woman during his first week. She wore a pencil skirt and a blazer. She had been scrolling on her phone until her eye was drawn to the cross that disappeared and reappeared with every turn of Chris's arm. She rested her phone against her hip and said in a *Can-I-tell-you-something-interesting?* way:

"You know I had an aunt that took me when I was a kid. To a church. Some summer thing. VBB? VBR? Something like that. And I can't tell you what we did exactly except that the people were so nice. I do remember we decorated cupcakes. Blue icing with Swedish Fish across one half? I remember that clearly: *Only across one half!* That was important because of the story. Someone made the fish appear, but only on one side of something? Who was it that did that? Moses?"

"No, no," said Chris, placing the whole wheat and cinnamon bagel in its brown, recyclable bag and handing it across the sneeze guard. "That was Jesus."

She only appeared the one time. But there were other, more regular customers who left Chris feeling especially oppressed. Nicholas, the Greek-American who ran a salon just around the corner, proved to be a great admirer of Chris's "faith."

"America," he'd say, leaning over the cash register while Chris made his sesame with onion-and-chive, "See, America is a Christian nation. It just is. Nothing against the Islams or the Jews, but historically speaking, *America is a Christian nation*."

The one-sided conversations with Nicholas were grating, but bearable because there were rarely any witnesses. Busy hours at Bruegger's were busy hours at the salon. Dead hours at the salon (during which time Nicholas sauntered over for the sesame-onion-chive-toasted) were dead hours at the bagel counter too.

Chris could bear the one-off conversation about his wrongly-assumed affiliation. He could bear Nicholas's Christian Nationalism and the urgency with which he asked Chris, weekly, whether or not he'd seen *American Sniper* yet. He could bear the taunts of the other Bruegger's employees to whom he had said of the tattoo, "Don't worry. Just a vestige of the last franchise I belonged to."

He could bear it, but would rather not have. Eventually he found himself researching tattoo removal during his fifteen-minute breaks. There were slight variations in method and cost, but on one point everyone was united: the pain.

The pain was a real issue for Chris. Pain was really *the* issue for Chris. It made him cringe to think of it now, but he'd only gotten through the initial tattoo experience — the whir of the tiny motor, the needle against

his skin — by contemplating the pain of Christ's crucifixion.

But this kind of visualization no longer represented anything real or comforting to him. So removal was out of the question. He'd have to get it altered instead.

There was a tattoo parlor two blocks away that was cheap and popular with the undergraduate set. Chris stopped by after his shift one day and sat in a folding chair, "the waiting area," while three girls and two boys giggled over the inspiration binder.

By the time the muscled tattoo artist got to Chris, he looked as exhausted by the sudden influx of barely-post-adolescent enthusiasm as Chris was. He sat Chris down in the dentist-like chair and asked him what he wanted. Chris pulled up his sleeve and said, "What can you do with this? What's the least ridiculous, non-religious thing you can turn this into?"

The man rubbed his bald head and shrugged. "Probably a swastika, to be honest with you."

So Chris kept the cross. He decided he could bear it — Nicholas's offensive comments, contemptuous side-eye from hipsters, a sudden flash of recognition in the eyes of hungry Evangelical girls who'd found themselves far, far from home. He could bear it. He was pretty much used to it.

But what he ultimately could not bear was the brown-haired woman in the purple parka. The one frequently accused of shooting up in the Bruegger's Bagels unisex/family/catchall bathroom. *Accused,* as Chris put it, though really she had been suspected then caught then charged with shooting up in the unisex/family/catchall bathroom. *Accused,* he continued to say because it sounded more polite than *convicted* of

shooting up in the bathroom, *caught* shooting up in the bathroom, *known* to have habitually used illegal drugs in the bathroom. His Bruegger's colleagues (several of them users themselves) were, in Chris's opinion, overly comfortable with those other, harsher words: *convicted, caught, known*.

"Why do you have to say it like that?" Chris asked one such colleague as he rinsed out the vestiges of jalapeño cream cheese from a metal basin. The purple-parka woman, post-arrest and release, had tried to use the restroom again and had been chased away by an afternoon employee named Justin. Justin was an aspiring stand-up who did cocaine on Saturdays, but *only* on Saturdays — and only in the safety and privacy of his own home.

"Say it like what?" Justin shot back. "Say it like it is?"

"We don't know it was her."

"You're full of shit, dude. We definitely know it was her. If she or you or anyone else wants to shoot up, it's fine by me, but have the decency to do it somewhere where I'm not going to have to make the difficult choice between calling the cops for some Narcan or stepping over your body to take my much-needed four o'clock piss."

The offensiveness of Justin's speech was typical. The certainty with which he made it made Chris uncomfortable.

Chris had been there the day the cops were called. He had gone in (as he told the police) to replace the toilet paper at one-thirty. The bathroom (as he told the police) had been clean. And the purple-parka woman had gone in around one forty-five, as attested to by the security camera. Had exited the bathroom around two-thirty after another customer loudly complained that she'd been waiting "forever" for the bathroom. Had left

altogether as the other customer started screaming about a needle and a tourniquet and asking everyone *could she contract HIV after being in the same room?*

Chris had been forced to tell the police all of this after the manager had called them. The officer wrote it into his notepad, looked up at Chris and said, "So she was shooting up in the bathroom?"

"Well," Chris had said. "I don't know about *that* exactly. I can't say *that* for sure. No one can say it who didn't actually see it. Not even you, Officer."

The way Chris saw it, the woman had come into a clean bathroom, and when she left there was drug paraphernalia everywhere. But what transpired in that bathroom outside of his vision was an unknown, a mystery he preferred not to contemplate.

Because he did not like to see the purple-parka woman sitting on the floor. Did not like to envision her tying the rubber exercise band just above her elbow. Did not like to imagine her with the spoon, the lighter. Her head leaning against the cold tile as she pushed the drug into her.

No, he did not like to think about these things. No more than he had liked praying silently to himself so many months ago, for the hundreds of homeless he saw through the windows of the train each day, or for the young woman who politely returned a deluded man's hello and was then forced to endure his unwanted kiss. Or the middle-aged woman whom he and two other passengers had believed was dead for a full three minutes before she woke with a start, stood, and exited the train without a word. Or the elderly man who had entered a car of the Red Line during rush hour, dropped his pants, and defecated on the floor. So many shouts, so many curse words, sixty people united in disgust. Chris ought to have

stayed back and helped the man. This was the exact kind of lost soul he'd been sent here to "reach." But he didn't. The doors opened, and he vacated the train with the rest. And that was it. After that, he was done.

No, such things overwhelmed him, depressed him. He could not bear to think of them, which is why he resisted Justin's condemnation of the woman — not primarily for its harshness, but for the suffering it implied, the suffering it brought to mind.

To Chris's knowledge, the purple-parka woman had never heard him defend her. To Chris's knowledge, she had never looked long enough, or been lucid enough, to notice he even existed. So to Chris's knowledge there was no reason she should have walked into Bruegger's Bagels during the dead hours between ten and eleven, approached the sneeze guard, looked at Chris's back and said, "I'm gonna need you to pray for me."

Chris had been doing the dirty job of cleaning the various compartments of the plasticine "cappuccino" machine. He'd been surrounded by the noxious air of semi-melted plastic for a good half hour and nearly felt high himself. He heard the voice before he saw the woman and he thought he was either hallucinating, dreaming, or else dead.

But when he turned around and wiped his coffee-stained plastic gloves against his polyester apron, there she was: the purple-parka woman who had maybe but definitely shot up in the bathroom regularly for months and then had been convicted and then had been banned from Bruegger's Bagels, Allston location.

She was mostly parka, but a significant portion of her was hair. Chris thought she was wearing her hair down, but when he looked closer, he saw an elastic band floating along the mudslide of a former ponytail, a piece of white cord like a collapsed levy, swimming the harsh tide of brown waves

that swirled around her shoulders then pooled in the melted snow inside her hood.

She had eyes too, and they were big, so big that Chris was surprised he hadn't noticed them before. Makeup also, but like the hair elastic, it had lost its purpose, had merged with her face in such a way that it looked like random smudges, indistinguishable in some places from dirt. He stared at her, and she put her hands on the sneeze guard — *dirty fingernails such dirty fingernails* — leaned in and said again, "I'm gonna need you to pray for me."

They were alone, and Chris could not speak normally, only in a whisper.

"What?" he said. "Why?"

"Because you know what Satan is."

He blinked.

"You know what I'm talking about when I say Satan."

Unfortunately, Chris did know what Satan was. It just so happened that he had retained that factoid from his useless training in Gospel Preaching at the unaccredited Bible College in Kansas. Satan meant Accuser. Sometimes Deceiver, but more often, more accurately, Accuser.

"Well, he's got me," she said. "And I'm afraid. Because," her dirty hands slid down the sneeze guard, her bottom lip bloomed toward her nose, tears ran through her scattered makeup, and her hoarse voice cracked as she said, "He's got me so tight I can't even pray. So I need you. I need you to do it for me."

Chris rubbed his palms together. Gently, so as to remove his plastic gloves, which fell slowly to the ground. The purple-parka woman was crying. And her head was bowed. Maybe just from the crying or maybe because she assumed he would do it, assumed he would start praying for her any second now.

"Come on," he said. "Why did you come here for this? I just make bagels."

"Because you're a believer. It's there on your arm — I've seen it. I see it every time I come in here."

He stood, dumbstruck. Meanwhile her big eyes narrowed and her face turned red beneath its smudges. "Why won't you do it? Why won't you pray for me? I didn't expect you to be like this, to be so —" Her skin screeched against the plastic as her hands scraped further down the sneeze guard. "I didn't think you'd be so ... *judgmental*."

At the word *judgmental* Chris's eyes moved to the door. He was frightened somebody might walk in. They'd see his tattoo and hear the word *judgmental*. They would jump to conclusions, think he was one of them, assume *he* was judgmental.

"Look," he said, his eyes moving between her and the thankfully still-shut door. "Look, I don't think that's going to help. Maybe a methadone clinic or a —"

"What's the matter with you?" There was panic in her voice. The sneeze guard quivered beneath her hands. *Oh god*, he thought. *She's pressing on it, she's freaking out*.

"Why won't you just pray for me? You think God won't help me because I'm —"

"No, no," Chris waved his hands over the bagel bar, trying to dispel her confusion. "I didn't mean that, I just meant —" Her eyes narrowed further, but her breathing didn't slow. She wasn't calming down. Why wouldn't she calm down?

"Okay, you know what ..." he said, stepping toward the sneeze guard. "I'll do it. I'm not judging you, I just don't really think —"

She looked up at him from her stooped position. The purple-parka woman. Who is banned from the Allston location. Whose picture is on the bulletin board in the staff room in back. Standing before him. Wanting a prayer.

"Okay," he said. "But it's been a while."

The purple-parka woman straightened up. She wiped her tears and snot with her fingers, then folded those fingers together in front of her chest. She bowed her head and touched her forehead to her knuckles.

"Okay," said Chris. "Okay. Here we go ..."

Dear Lord was more aloof and therefore better than *Heavenly Father*, but still not quite as impersonal as *Dear God*. He would have liked to have said *Dear God* but of course he would have *liked* to have left the room, the city, the state. He would have *liked* to do absolutely anything but this.

It was physically painful for him to pray. His eyelids tried to flutter open even as he forced them shut. His neck rebelled against the stretch provoked by his downturned head. His fingers feigned arthritic when forced to bend around each other in this way again. The pain of coerced

prayer, the revulsion of it. And the shame of his own incompetence — his incompetence when it came to both prayer and avoiding prayer.

And yet, in the midst of the pain, the words came. Words that were not his own and yet were comfortable on his tongue. Very little substance but a consistent tone of beseeching. The name of God falling like commas, making Chris's sentences pulsate the way curse words punctuated Justin's comic monologues. Not the name of God so much as the pet names of God that he had heard his mother and father, his grandparents, and his childhood congregation use: *O Lord, Merciful Savior, Redeemer, Lamb of God, Sweet Jesus*. His voice going long and smooth like his father's at prayer, his chin moving left to right with emphasis like his mother's. His mind rolling over in pain, his anguished mind shrieking all the while: *full of shit, full of shit, full of shit.*

And then the *Amen* and the woman's face. Still dirty, still wet. But easy.

And her voice, not like the voice before. Not the cracking or the hoarseness. Instead, a smaller voice which had been hidden within that other voice. The real voice saying, "Thank you." The purple parka turning and walking out into the snow.

Chris alone but for the "cappuccino" machine. Just Chris and the mechanical whir of the refrigerated cream-cheese counter. Chris, with two black lines on his arm, whispering what he swears to himself will be his very last prayer: *Please don't send her back here again. Please don't ever make me do that again.*

Janille Stephens grew up in Texas and received her MFA at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. Her writing has appeared in *Fathom Magazine*, *Dappled Things*, and *Well Read Mom*. Janille's debut novel *Of a Piece* will be published by Wiseblood books in April 2027. She writes weekly pieces on art, faith, and motherhood on her Substack, Human Things.

FICTION

Sandie Eggers Seagroves

August in North Charleston

Acrid cigarette ash and stale beer's wet cardboard smells commingled to wake Suzannah.

She stretched, her hand touching the other side of the bed. It was still damp. Glancing at the cheap bedside table, she noticed a neatly folded pile of cash sitting underneath a scarred and dirty ashtray.

Thoughtful of him.

Suzannah lay still in the early morning light, as the air crouched like a panther on her chest. Having long ago given up its futile struggle, the motel room's ancient window air conditioner was silent.

August in North Charleston.

My life is shit. How did I come to this? Me? Had a loving family, almost a storybook childhood. Free-range summers spent with my grandparents.

Memories began to seep into her drowsy mind.

Watching great egrets stalk the marsh. Smelling the pluff mud. Lazily catching blue crabs from the dock. Holding Grandma's hand as we went on our daily nature walks. Sundays walking to church, my ponytail adorned with a large, starched bow that Grandma had lovingly placed there.

Her heart sat heavy in her chest. Slowly Suzannah arose from the bed, her thin cotton shift pasted with sweat to all the curves of her body. Seeking relief from the heat and heartache, she entered the bathroom for a cool shower.

The shower failed to have much effect on either. Hot, heavy air enveloped her within moments of stepping out of the shower, further squeezing her heart.

Her distant memories returned.

"Do you know why the marsh is important, honey?"

"No, Grandma."

"Well, the marsh is important because it's the place where many baby marsh animals live. Like a nursery."

"Grandma, that's cool!"

"Yes, it is. And who do you think created the marsh and tenderly tucked all those little baby animals there?"

"God?"

"Yes, honey, God."

She smiled briefly as her heart continued to ache. Patting her body with a threadbare towel and slipping on the damp shift, she closed the motel room door and walked into the bright sunlight.

Suzannah's eyes adjusted to the light; she walked across the motel's parking lot and onto the shoulder of the road for the long trek back to her Section 8 apartment. A few pieces of gravel got stuck in her dollar store flip-flops as she walked.

"Ouch! Damn!"

Just yards to her right lay the marsh. She spotted a dock in the distance. A thought slowly formed in her mind.

Maybe.

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The sun glowed red as it began to sink toward the horizon, igniting the clouds. The late summer air was redolent of marsh scents. A soft, briny breeze rustled through the spartina grass, conveying the fecund earthiness of marsh mud. Silence, a reverent silence, descended upon the marsh as eventide neared.

Sitting at the edge of the dock, her feet dangling above the brackish water, Suzannah fingered her crab line, vainly hoping some hungry blue would find the tasty chicken neck resting in the mud. Her head dripped with sweat, beads turning to rivulets that trailed down her face and back.

She didn't mind, intent upon her crab line, hoping for a hit. *A foolhardy pursuit, some would say. Crabbing's no good in August.* But to Suzannah, it was not just a crab line, but a lifeline, connecting her to a world alive with promise. A time of innocence. A time of genuine love. A time of ...

She dared not let it go.

The sun was moments away from disappearing.

Golden hour. But not for me. Gotta get to work.

Suzannah pulled up her empty crab line. Unhooking the chicken neck, she threw it into the water, then wound the line around the weighted hook. She stuck it into the pocket of her faded gingham shift. Suzannah fished out a crumpled cigarette from her other pocket and lit it with a match pulled from a pack advertising a strip club. After taking a few drags, she threw the cigarette down on the dock, crushing it underneath her flip-flops. Sighing, she began walking back down the road to that motel where she'd started her day. She knew she needed to get freshened up a bit before she hit the streets.

Further up the marsh from where she had crabbed, Suzannah saw something she hadn't before. It was a small patch of sandy beach where several people mingled around a large wooden cross.

She stopped her walk to take a closer look. A small distance beyond those on the shore were two people, one in a white tee shirt and the other wearing a faded blue polo shirt. The blue polo-shirted person seemed to be talking, and the white tee-shirted person was listening. Then she thought she heard both people say "AMEN." No sooner had they said it, the white tee shirt went backward into the water, supported by the blue polo shirt. A moment later, the white tee shirt arose from the water. Laughter and smiles, then the white tee shirt walked back up to the shore, as another white tee shirt walked toward blue polo shirt.

Suzannah stood for a moment, watching. Deep within her, a feeling stirred, resembling nostalgia yet surpassing it. A gentle urge to join those people on the shore, just to be near their laughter and joy.

Suzannah stepped from the shoulder of the road onto the sand and, tentatively, walked toward the white tee-shirted group. Work can wait, she thought, vowing to herself she'd stay for just a moment. *Laughter. I'd forgotten how beautiful it sounds*. Suzannah's aching heart longed for just a wisp of mirth.

A little while, then I'll leave. Just a little while. That's all. Then to work.

As Suzannah neared the little white tee-shirted group gathered on the shore, thoughts of a brief meeting began fading. With each step she took, her recent past receded deeper into the dank shadows.

With each step, the closer to eternity she came.

Sandie Eggers Seagroves has spent more than 40 years as a professional marketing writer. She is a self-described "Midwestern gal with a Southern heart," having realized this anatomical anomaly within days of moving to Charleston, SC. "August in North Charleston" is her first literary submission in nearly five decades.

FICTION

Reid Echelmeier

The Wild Wing

Since the day I first watched Samyeli run at Veliefendi, I had hoped for a chance to examine him up close. He lacked the refined, skeletal elegance of a modern Thoroughbred. His sandy bulk and broad shoulders belonged to an older world; he looked less like a creature of the track and more like a mount from the battlefields of old.

And yet, time and time again, the horse would somehow surge past the competition, leaving an impossible, roaring draft in his wake. It wasn't just that he always won; it was the way the air flattened against the rails when he passed, a hot, sudden gale that left spectators cheering and speculators scratching their heads.

So when the stablehand rapped on my door, despite the inky, predawn hour, I quickly dressed, grabbed my leather kit bag, and followed the young lad into the cool autumn night.

"What's wrong?" I asked as we set out.

"I was just bringing him back to the stall when, from the bushes — it was like the crack of a whip. But a flash too." He gathered his breath. "And then blood."

"Shot?"

He nodded.

"How much blood?"

"Like the spring at your people's St. Mary's."

I grabbed the lad's shoulder, stopping his frantic pace. His dark eyes looked at me, wide with strange, terrified wonder.

I sighed, taking off my hat. "I'm sorry, son. If the horse has taken a bullet, even if he lives, he'll never race again. It's best if we just let nature take its —"

"No." The boy shook his head. "You don't understand. Samyeli's different. He's — he's more than a horse."

"More?"

He looked away from me.

"What do you mean, boy?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Master Fikret told me not to tell anyone —"

"You want me to be able to help him, don't you?"

"It's what I've been telling him all along, but he didn't believe me. But now —" His face brightened at this. "Now he knows I'm right. Samyeli's a tulpar — a real one."

I stood up straight, trying to remember where I had heard the term before. It was old Turkish, I knew that.

"Tul," I said, recalling what I had read. "That means 'wild,' right? And 'par'—?"

"Wing!" he whispered with a smile. "It's true! Just like I've read in *The Epic of Manas*."

"Hm," I grunted, settling my hat back on my head and continuing down the path. "Aren't you a little old to still be reading fairy tales?"

"But those stories ... they've got to come from somewhere, right?"

"Of course," I said, nodding my head. "They came from trying to explain with stories what we now understand with science. Come along, son. I'm afraid you'll see soon enough."

I felt a little cruel, so swiftly snuffing the boy's sense of hope. But it had to be done. Watching a horse die would be painful, but it would sober him up. It was clear that he was overexcited by the shot, the blood, and the trauma — and his fairy tale stories weren't helping that.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. The hippodrome lay just beyond the ancient, crumbling walls of Constantinople, so there was nothing to impede the autumn fog rolling off the Sea of Marmara. We stuck to the cobblestone path, cutting our way through clouds of thick, salty mist to the complex of stables behind the racing track.

As we neared, I could discern two lights through the fog. An oil lantern outside the stable spun slowly in the breeze, its cage sending geometric shadows creeping across the wooden wall. The other light, much smaller, burned with intensity one moment, only to nervously jump around in the fog. Then it steadied and brightened again.

Fikret flicked his cigarette aside the moment he saw us.

"Allah, Allah, what took you so long, Osman?"

"I'm — I'm sorry, Master. I was —"

"Enough." Fikret raised his hand. "Not while my stud is bleeding out. Come, hocam. There's no time."

The horse owner slipped into the darkness inside. I offered a sympathetic shrug to Osman and passed through the doorway. Lantern light seeping from between boards offered the only illumination in the passageway between stables. The smell of straw and manure clung heavily to the air. I followed Fikret past several stalls before he stopped, turned to me, and withdrew something from his pocket.

It took a moment, in the darkness, to catch the light reflecting off a blade.

I stepped back, pulling my kit bag in front of me. "What —"

"Quiet!" Fikret hissed through his moustache. "You want to see the great Samyeli, huh? Then you'll never tell another soul about what you see here tonight. Hold your tongue, or you'll lose it, got it?" He raised the knife before his face and shook it with each word. "Don't doubt me, hoca."

"Alright, alright," I said, surprising myself.

Ordinarily, I would have never stayed. No veterinarian should have to work under such conditions. But my curiosity had been piqued beyond resistance. I could not leave without seeing what was beyond the stable's door.

Fikret pocketed the knife and turned to open the stable, but, before he did, he looked back at me once more through narrow eyes.

"On my honor," I said, placing a hand over my heart. "Not a soul."

Fikret grunted and pushed through the door. I followed him into the darkness. He struck a match and lit the lamp hanging in the corner. The flame cast flickering light around the small stable, revealing a low wooden manger and a form buried beneath hay.

Blood pooled on the dirt floor.

"Why did you cover him like this?" I said, kneeling to brush the straw off the horse. "The wound is already at risk for infection —"

I stopped short. My hands, in clearing off the hay, had brushed upon something. Something that wasn't horse hair.

"What is this?" I asked, continuing to clear the hay off Samyeli's form.

"You tell me," said Fikret, lighting another cigarette. "You're the vet."

I shook my head, examining the creature. In every way, the horse was exactly as I had known him: burly form, sandy hair, and a tall, proud neck. And yet, the bullet, before puncturing the skin above the foreleg, had also passed through something else. Long white appendages, feathers stained with spots of red.

"I don't know," I stammered. "Some sort of mutation? He didn't have these when I saw him race before. When did they appear?"

"Only after he was shot. Osman says you can only see the wings of the tulpar when they're near death."

"What?" I looked back at the owner. "Surely you don't believe that boy's tales?"

Fikret held out his hand, palm up, at the horse. "I don't care what he is. I only care if you can save him — can you?"

"I don't know," I said, grabbing my gloves from my kit bag. "He's lost a lot of blood. I don't know how he's still conscious."

I looked toward Samyeli's face. The horse wasn't thrashing like other creatures under tremendous pain. His dark eyes were calm, watching me carefully.

"I've always known he was no natural horse," Fikret said. "It just didn't make sense — the way that he ran."

"Well, we know he can't be a tulpar," I said as I worked, cleaning around the wound. "So what is he?"

"All I know is he was winning me loads of lira, and if you can't fix him up, he'll be winning me none." He leaned back on the wooden wall of the stable and shrugged his shoulders. "My best guess is an angel."

"An angel?"

"Why not?" His nostrils exhaled twin trails of smoke. "They've got to be real, I guess. Our Prophet, peace be upon him, spoke of angels. Aren't they in your people's Scriptures too?"

My hands worked as I listened. The horse was incredibly calm, but I didn't know how long that would last. It was best to find and remove the bullet while he remained still.

"Sure," I said. "The Bible speaks of angels, but those were just myths — existential kernels, really."

"What's that now?"

"I mean, angels are just — just metaphors, symbols, if you will," I tried to explain. "They're not actual winged beings — that's just the shell left over from an ancient, outdated cosmology. It's the same with all that's supernatural — demons, the resurrection, the virgin birth —"

"So Samyeli's just a shell?"

"No — that's not what I mean." I shook my head. It was hard to think straight when trying to operate on the horse. "Look, I need to focus on what I'm doing here. But I'm sure there is some sort of natural explanation. It must be a mutation or a crossbreed with another species ..."

I trailed off as I continued to work. At last, my pincers closed on something solid. I extracted the lead, wiped it clean, and held up the bullet for Fikret to see.

His face hardened. "Coward just shot and ran."

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Could've been anyone. I can't think of another owner whose eyes didn't burn with jealousy."

Fikret watched as I bandaged the wound with care. Samyeli then lay very still, his pulse having grown faint. While my hands were busy, it could have been any other operation. But as I finished, I couldn't help but examine the appendages once again.

Even folded, they were of astonishing length, with feathers that would make even the king of eagles feel like nothing more than a sparrow. Each quill was a pure, undefiled white, except where stained red.

I looked again at the noble creature's face and felt once more that his large, glassy eyes were filled not with expected animal terror but with a wilder, disconcerting knowledge.

The crack of a branch outside broke the silence in the stable.

Fikret drew his knife.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Probably whoever shot 'im is back to finish the job."

I rose to my feet, grabbing the bone cutter from my bag, and followed Fikret out of the stable. We crept, breathless, down the dark hallway. After a nod to one another, we swept out into the night.

The fog, wary of the approaching dawn, had fled to the nearby hills. The oil lamp still swung lazily from its hook. Osman sat on a low stool, whittling a freshly snapped tree branch. He looked up at us with anxious eyes.

"Will Samyeli be okay?"

Fikret's tension boiled over. "What do you think you're doing, breaking twigs at this hour, son?"

"I'm sorry — I —"

The horse owner stepped forward. "Give me that stick, son, and I'll teach you a —"

A wind, warm and sudden, swept around the stable, scattering Osman's whittlings and sending the lantern swinging.

Fikret stopped short. The three of us looked at one another. Then, turning, all rushed back to Samyeli's stall.

We arrived to find it empty. The manger, the lamp, and the straw were the same. But of the winged horse, only a pool of blood and stained straw remained.

"How?" Fikret bellowed, ripping through the hay.

I backed away slowly, a settled resignation coming over me.

As Fikret tore through the stalls, calling down curses on the worthless coward who stole his horse, I stepped back outside.

A fiery sun was piercing the lingering dark — bright, brilliant, and red. It was only a star, I reminded myself — a burning ball of gas spinning through space. And I knew this was fact, but other truths crowded in. Stables. Mangers. Blood.

And somehow the sun seemed more fierce, more wild.

I suddenly felt that I — like the fog — should flee to the hills.

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FICTION

Morgan Want

Eyes Like Fire

It's only a mountain lion, Anna told herself. Right before she realized that "only" wasn't the right word for her situation. But when she turned and saw those bright red eyes looking up at her from the ravine below the trail, a horrible fear had grabbed her by the throat and threatened to pull her off her horse and down into that pit too. Then she'd taken a breath and willed herself to think rationally. Panicking was a good way to get killed in the mountains. And the thing looking up at her was only a mountain lion.

Anna was certain of it, because she'd heard at least one screaming down the mountainside when she first arrived at the reservoir the night before. She had been unsettled at first — mountain lions sounded uncannily like a woman screaming — but she hadn't been truly afraid then. They weren't likely to approach her campsite, unless she gave them a reason.

It was too dark for Anna to tell with certainty how close this particular mountain lion was, and she didn't have the courage to shine her flashlight on it. Anna didn't know how a cat's eyes could glow without reflecting light, but it must be possible, because no other explanation was. What she did know was that it didn't matter how close it was, because if it wanted to, that lion could bound up the side of the ravine and be on top of her and her horse, Two-tone, before Anna had a chance to scream herself.

But the eyes didn't move. Anna's face felt hot staring into them, as if she was sitting too close to a fire.

There's no reason to be afraid, she told herself. She'd probably just wandered too close to the lion's territory, or maybe a fresh kill. That was all. It wouldn't attack her, not if she got moving now and fast.

She tried to tell Two-tone to "walk on," but her voice came out as a harsh croak. Instead, she clicked her tongue, squeezed his sides with her heels, and Two-tone loped forward with a jerk. Anna's skin prickled with the feeling that she was being watched, but she didn't look behind her. She kept her flashlight beam pointed at the trail ahead; its soft white light led her forward like a will-o-wisp, past any holes or obstacles that could trip Two-tone up on their way back to the campsite.

Anna hadn't meant to be on the trail after dark. She knew better than that. Anna had been camping in the Rockies since she was a child, and she was no stranger to camping alone, but this was her first time at the reservoir. Her father had been telling her about it for years, had talked about taking her there after her high school graduation, but that was before the last night of her senior trip. Before he'd begun to look at her coldly, as if Anna had failed some kind of test. Before Sandra.

Anna didn't tell him she was going to the reservoir alone that weekend, although she had brought up the idea to him, just to see how he'd react. All he said was,

"Anna, that mountain will expose you and kill you."

As if he hadn't taught her everything she knew about camping and riding. As if she was weak.

Then again, if he knew she fell asleep fishing by the reservoir her second night there, she might have a harder time refuting him. But it wasn't

entirely Anna's fault. Her first semester at college had drained her, in more ways than one, thanks to Sandra. Thinking about her made Anna grit her teeth. The trip up here wasn't about proving something to her father, or anyone else. Not really. It had been her chance to get away for a while, to be truly alone without being lonely.

The reservoir was unreachable except on horseback. Her campsite wasn't quite above the treeline, but it was close. The air felt fresh and clean, so different from her college campus, which stank of burnt tires and exhaust in the parking lots, and too many bodies in the dorms.

Both the sky and the reservoir were such a clear blue that the waters seemed to overflow into the clouds. Anna felt she was in a place where there was no divide between heaven and earth. She'd brought premium oats for Two-tone, but he ignored them and went straight for the grass; Anna didn't blame him. She could smell how sweet it was, so she'd let him graze while she set up her fishing pole. It was the first time in months that she'd been truly relaxed. That was why she fell asleep by the reservoir, and no one who knew what Anna had been going through could judge her for it.

Anna looked back down into the ravine. The eyes were still following her, hovering through the darkness, unblinking, without ever turning away from her. She realized she was slouching down so low in her saddle that she was almost lying across Two-tone's back, and sat up straight to try to make herself look bigger. The old adage, "It's more afraid of you than you are of it," came to mind, but Anna wasn't so sure that was true at the moment.

The lion would stop stalking her once she was out of its territory, but it was strange that it was stalking her at all. What was even stranger was that Two-tone didn't act afraid. His ears were forward and twitching, and

Anna could hear his tail swishing back and forth behind her. Two-tone had been coming with her on trail rides since he'd first been broke, back when she was a child, and did not scare easily, but there was a predator right below him, maybe close enough for Anna to touch. She had no way of knowing.

Night in the mountains was unlike anywhere else. If she turned her flashlight off, there would be no light besides the feeble shine of the stars above. Those stars had been Anna's only way of telling up from down when she first woke up, dizzy and disoriented. She'd left her flashlight in her saddlebag — a stupid thing to do — and had to feel her way through the dark to find Two-tone, clicking her tongue and listening for his soft whinnies and snorts.

There was no way she should have been able to see those eyes without turning her light on them, and yet she had. And she'd felt them before she saw them, like a hot breath on the back of her neck.

Two-tone snorted and jerked his head up as he stopped to paw at the ground; he was starting to mirror Anna's tension, so she forced herself to relax. She was being ridiculous; there was nothing abnormal about that lion. But if Two-tone panicked, it might do the same and turn aggressive, and even if it didn't, Anna still didn't want to risk Two-tone throwing her off his back or falling and rolling on her. If that happened, Anna may as well start yelling, "Here, kitty-kitty!"

She told her roommates where she would be this weekend, but they weren't expecting her home until Sunday night. Anna might lie alone and injured on the mountain for another whole day before someone came to look for her. She imagined lying in the dirt, in pain, her throat burning from thirst, wondering if she would ever be found, assuming anyone

bothered to look for her. Was that how Sandra felt, the last night of their senior trip?

Blood pounded in Anna's ears, and fear and dread chilled her so thoroughly, she felt as if she was submerged in an ice bath. Her situation was nothing like Sandra's. Anna was nothing like Sandra.

Sandra had gotten everything she deserved that night. She was a cruel person, and always had been, ever since junior high. But she was pretty and athletic and witty, and that would have made her popular enough, but she knew how to wield her good traits and her bad together, like dual blades, so that no one wanted to risk her displeasure. Once, during their freshman year, Sandra had invited Anna to a party, and even offered to give her a ride, along with the rest of her friends. Anna never made it to the party; Sandra had ditched her at a gas station on the way. Later, Sandra tried to tell her that she'd forgotten about her, as if Anna wasn't worth remembering. Anna couldn't remember what she did to Sandra to make her angry, but she never forgot what Sandra did to her.

Their class had gone camping in the woods outside of their town for their senior trip, and Anna had the idea to ditch Sandra out there almost as soon as they started planning it. It had been easy to convince the rest of the class to go along with it; Anna was not the only person Sandra had ever been cruel to, and with graduation coming up, there wasn't much she'd be able to do in retaliation.

If the situation got a little out of hand, that wasn't Anna's fault. Maybe she and the rest of the class should have come forward sooner when Sandra didn't show up for school those first few days after the trip, but they had no reason to think anything bad had happened to her. Sandra had always painted herself as a great outdoorsman — better than Anna, according to her — and if half the stories she told about herself were true,

then she shouldn't have had any trouble finding her way to the road. Everyone just thought Sandra had chosen to stay home from school, that she'd gone to ground to lick her wounds for a while, but when the police started questioning their classmates about Sandra's whereabouts a week later, it was obvious that something had gone wrong.

Anna didn't try to hide what she did — what they'd all done; she told the police everything. After all, it was just a prank gone wrong. She hadn't meant to hurt Sandra; no one had. She knew there'd be consequences, and she accepted them, even better than some of her classmates had. Her whole class was barred from walking the stage during graduation, and a few local scholarship foundations withdrew their support, but, much like Sandra, there wasn't much the school could do to them so close to graduation.

Sandra, for her part, was almost a different person when she returned to school; she lost some weight during her week in the woods, and she was a lot quieter, more withdrawn, but no one could complain about that. It was Anna's father who truly surprised her with her reaction. When he found out what Anna had done — no, what she'd been a part of — he asked her only one question:

"Do you feel good about yourself now?"

He expected her to feel shame, and she almost did, but Anna doubted Sandra had felt ashamed of herself when she'd left her at the gas station four years ago.

So Anna met her father's gaze and said, "Yes."

But Anna didn't want to think about Sandra right now. She needed to get back to her campsite. It was ridiculous, but she felt, almost instinctively,

that if she could take shelter in her tent, she'd be safe. It made as much sense as hiding under her bed covers from an imaginary monster; that lion, if it truly was a lion, could tear through her tent if it wanted to, but at least Anna would be out of its sight. And she wanted, more than anything, to get out from under its gaze.

She looked back down the ravine, and almost did a double take. The eyes were gone.

"You won't see them unless they want you to."

Her father told her that, during one of their camping trips together, the first time she'd ever heard a mountain lion scream. Just because Anna couldn't see it didn't mean it wasn't there.

Sweat ran off her face and onto her saddle. It was as if the fire in those eyes had moved closer instead of further away, and was burning her up from the inside out.

"Get a grip," Anna told herself. "There's nothing there. You can't see it, because it's moved on, and there's nothing there."

Something moved out of the corner of her right eye. She turned and clutched Two-tone's reins so tightly, she almost jerked his head up. The eyes hung like twin stars over the trail, closer and brighter than before. Somehow, the lion managed to climb up out of the ravine and circled around beside her, without Anna seeing or hearing it. She tried to take a breath to steady herself, but her lungs felt locked.

The lion seemed to be eye level with her, but that was impossible. Anna was on horseback. No mountain lion was that big; it would have to be a monster. She could almost see the outline of its body in the darkness, but

it was like watching a shadow cast by a flame, constantly changing shape and direction. It seemed to crouch on all four legs at first, but as Anna stared at it, it grew taller and lankier and stood up, like a man. Then it dropped back down to four legs and was an animal again.

The eyes floated up and down with their owner's changing shape. Anna's hands shook, but she couldn't bring herself to turn her flashlight away from the trail and into those eyes. She didn't want to see their owner's face. Whatever it was, it wasn't a lion. It was something else, and it was following her. It was ... it was ...

Anna didn't know what it was, but it must be something evil. Nothing good could make Anna feel this afraid, because only bad people feared the good, and Anna wasn't a bad person. "Who are you?" she whispered. "What do you want?

The eyes kept staring at her, as silent as the stars. Two-tone snorted and shook his head, restless from standing still too long, but still unafraid. Weren't animals supposed to be able to sense evil? Shouldn't Anna herself be able to tell the difference between good and evil? The only thing she felt for certain was a sense of judgment, that those eyes saw deeper into Anna than had ever looked into herself.

The eyes blinked, then disappeared again, but this time, Anna was certain they were still there. She could feel them, burning through her like twin fires.

"Please," she prayed, hoping God was listening. "Make it go away."

Dark spots danced in front of Anna's eyes like smoke, blurring the trail in front of her. Fear was making her lightheaded, and it wasn't safe for her to keep riding Two-tone. She glanced around one more time, then slid off

him to lead him by the reins. He breathed softly on her hand and arm, as if to comfort her.

Anna's father was right about one thing: she shouldn't have come up to the mountain, no matter how badly she wanted to get away from her life. Anna hadn't intended to ever see Sandra again after graduation. They were supposed to part ways, knowing that Anna had gotten the last word. Then she spotted Sandra at her college's freshman orientation. She didn't know Sandra was going to the same college as her, but then again, they hadn't exactly shared their plans with each other. Anna would have been happy to avoid Sandra and forget the past, for both their sakes, but Sandra had noticed her too. It didn't take long for the story of their senior trip to spread around their small college campus, or at least Sandra's side of it. And there was no one else from their high school to vouch for Anna's.

She knew she could always transfer schools, that she could find someplace where no one knew her, and the past could truly be non-existent, but her father told her she had to at least finish her first year. Even though each week felt harder than the last one.

"Maybe it should be hard," was all he said when she tried to argue with him.

There was a satellite phone in her saddlebag for emergencies. Anna could call him now, or one of her roommates, if they'd answer, but what would she say? She didn't know how to explain what was happening to her right now without sounding insane. And yet, she desperately wanted to hear another voice right now, to hear that everything would be okay, that she wasn't the person everyone believed her to be.

A hot breeze touched her face, and Anna stopped. Two eyes burned bright in front of her, filling her vision completely and consuming her.

She didn't realize she'd let go of Two-tone's reins, or that she'd started backing up until her left foot stepped into empty air. Anna didn't have a chance to scream; she just fell backwards off the path and down into the ravine. Pain radiated through her skull as her head smacked solid earth.

She might have blacked out, but she wasn't sure; she dropped her flashlight when she fell, and darkness had her in its grip now. Her head spun, as if she was still rolling down the ravine, even though she laid still. She twitched her legs and thought about trying to sit up, but it hurt too much to try to move. Blood and bile filled her mouth, choking her.

I'm dying, she realized. I'm going to die here.

Anna thought she was already as good as dead, lying in a hole in the ground, where no one would ever find her. Two bright red stars shone above her, the only light she could see. They burned as bright as ever, while Anna felt like a flame that had cooled down to ash. Their gaze didn't hurt her as much now; they reminded her of sitting next to a warm stove on a cold day, but she knew that they'd still burn her if she reached out for them.

It was amazing that Anna could feel frightened of anything this close to death, but the idea that their owner might come down into the ravine with her scared her too much to think about for long. Yet if the eyes disappeared again, Anna would be completely alone in this pit, and that thought was worse.

She half-expected them to disappear, now that she wanted them to stay, but they didn't move. How could she have ever thought those eyes belonged to an ordinary lion? There was no malice in them; they looked at her as if they knew her, even though she did not know them. Maybe they'd always watched her, without her knowing, and by coming here, to

the reservoir, where the earth reached up into heaven, she was the one who had moved closer to them.

"Please," she whispered. "Please."

Please what? Save her? Forgive her? There was no point in lying to herself anymore; Anna needed forgiveness. She just hadn't wanted to ask for it. The pain and fear she felt now could not be different from what Sandra had experienced, alone in the woods, because of her. Humiliating Sandra had been Anna's goal; she wanted her to feel unloved, to wonder if she would be missed, like Anna did now. The only difference was that no one had left Anna on the mountain; she'd come up here herself, because she'd wanted to stand over everyone. Instead, she'd fallen down into a place from which she could not rise.

Tears slid down her cheeks, and she almost thought she could feel a warmth touch her face, like a hand. Her vision blurred, and her heart nearly stilled when she thought she saw the eyes vanish. But when she blinked, they were still there.

"Don't leave me," she whispered. "Please, please, don't leave me. I'm sorry, for everything. I want to make it right. Just please don't leave."

The eyes seemed to draw closer, as if their owner had descended into the pit with her after all, and behind them was that strange shape that shifted between lion and man. Pink and gold streaks cut through the sky above, and the eyes smoldered and faded with the light. Anna felt as if she was fading with them, yet she stayed where she lay. Anna felt as though she was coming back to herself after traveling a very long way.

Two-tone snorted above her. She closed her eyes, then opened them again as a pair of unfamiliar voices suddenly brought the world back into focus.

"Is that a horse? Where's its rider?"

"Hey, look down there! It's a girl! Is she ... do you think she's ...?"

"No! She's alive!"

Morgan Want is a short story writer and former journalist. She is currently at work on her debut novel. Her work can be seen on her Instagram page, @wantmorgan.

FICTION

Kay Exley Gunkel

Deborah's Revelation

Deborah wasn't sorry she had insisted Allison go with her to the family reunion. The day would clear. Early morning fog lay in a milky puddle over the hen house roof, but Deborah knew the sun would lap it up and that, eventually, she and her daughter would be in possession of a pretty day. June was a nice month for a picnic. She was sure Allison would pass right over the fried chicken and apple pie. She'd take a spoonful of slaw and plenty of cucumber and tomato salad. She would sit at a picnic table farthest from the center of the party and stare pleasantly out at the fields or slip off to the vegetable garden to see what grew.

It had been years since Deborah herself accepted an invitation to the Clawson reunion. After all, she was a Clawson by marriage only. Her husband was dead eighteen years, and she never much liked his sister, Beth, who spent much of her time getting her hair done, or her nails, or shopping at the mall over in Greenville. Deborah wondered how Beth and Brad ever had a crop of corn or a field of soybeans. Brad, at least, knew how to get some work done. Deborah had no intention of getting corn from Beth and Brad. Her excuse, early on, had been that she could buy from her neighbor in Clarkesville and save the gas of driving over to Clayton. She was sure her chickens fed better for it.

The reunion came around every two years. Now that Allison was out of college, Deborah decided the time was right to reconnect with the other Clawsons. As she gathered eggs, she tallied dishes she would take to the party: squash casserole, peaches she pickled herself, and a big bowl of new

potatoes. She removed her rubber boots, squirted them off with the hose and set them beside the hen house door.

A sweet smell of clover hovered over her grass as she walked up the hill toward her kitchen door. She stepped into the kitchen, holding a large basket of eggs in one hand and catching the screen door with the flat of her other hand. Allison still slept. Deborah glanced at the clock. On Saturdays she took care to be quiet. Other days, Allison got up at six-thirty to teach school. Deborah stored the eggs and prepared her breakfast.

At eleven, she and Allison were on the road toward Clayton. "There'll be cousins you haven't met," Deborah said. Allison sat at the wheel and Deborah in the navigator's seat.

"I know all the ones my age."

"No, I mean those girls Brad's brother had by his second marriage. They should be teenagers by now."

"I'm sure I'll recognize everybody. It hasn't been that long since I saw them all, and those girls, Jean and Marianne, were at the wedding we went to a few summers ago."

Deborah looked out the window, then toward the back seat at the cardboard box filled with balled newspapers that formed a nest for her squash casserole, peaches and potatoes. Nothing had been upset when they made the turn onto Highway 441. Allison's pretty yellow sundress looked perfect for a picnic and showed off her long, slender arms. Deborah lifted herself a little from the car seat to smooth the back of her white skirt. She tucked her red and white checkered blouse more securely into the waistband. She wore red Grasshoppers, the same style of canvas lace-ups she'd been buying since Allison was four. She remembered

distinctly the day she bought her first pair. Jeffery had been dead a month, and Allison needed summer shoes. Red Keds on the children's rack looked like the happiest pair in the store. The saleswoman laced them up for Allison, who walked around on the carpet flat-footed, trying them out, wanting not to wrinkle them. Deborah took out her wallet to pay, but Allison spotted grown-up Grasshoppers and begged Deborah to buy them so they could "be twins."

Allison took another sharp right, and Deborah checked the backseat again as they pulled into the relatives' driveway and parked in the shade. There was no need to go inside the house. The flock of relatives stood on the lawn, about two dozen people. Platters of food and coolers found shade under a piece of orange and black canvas that fluttered like a monarch butterfly. Allison carried the potatoes and pickles. Deborah held the hot squash casserole in front of her with the precision of a crossing guard. Once she set the dish down, she allowed herself to be greeted, individually.

"It's a mighty pleasant day for a picnic," she said to Beth.

"I'm glad you came," Beth said.

"I have a hard time getting away from the chickens, and the garden and all of the customers who come to buy eggs."

"Today's a day to relax."

Brad walked over to Deborah to give her a hug. He pointed out his grandchildren, one on the swing and another chasing a duck near the pond. He waved his son and daughter-in-law over to greet Deborah, then turned his attention to fixing her a glass of iced tea. Beth and Brad's other children, and their boyfriends and girlfriends, welcomed Deborah and Allison. Once she had been properly greeted, Deborah began filling glasses

with ice and slicing lemons for tea. She placed her hand on the aluminum foil covering her casserole to check its warmth.

"That ice might melt before we're ready to eat," Beth said. "I'll take your casserole to the kitchen and put it in the oven to stay hot." Deborah watched Beth cross the grass. Her backless sandals smacked against her heels. A breeze lifted the hem of her skirt and tossed it up around her thighs. Beth laughed and left the skirt just as it was, as she carried the casserole.

The only person sitting was one of Brad's brothers' teen daughters, Marianne, the fat one. She wore running clothes. At about five feet two and nearly as wide, she didn't look like a runner. Deborah noted that each cheek of her behind, the size of a small watermelon or large cantaloupe, hung over the edge of the picnic-table bench. Schoolgirl rubber bands with plastic butterflies pulled her hair back from her forehead. Deborah sat down next to her and smiled. She knew how to make an ugly girl feel better about herself.

"What grade are you in now, Marianne?"

Marianne didn't answer but looked Deborah up and down like she was examining an ear of corn. She rested her gaze on the wart above Deborah's narrow wrist.

"Are you in high school?"

"Of course. Eleventh grade."

"I can tell you exactly what courses I took in eleventh grade. I remember all the things I learned in biology and how we dissected a frog and studied its tissues and organs and digestive system. What's your favorite class?"

"What's your favorite chicken?"

Deborah looked over the top of Marianne's head and out into the lawn to where she saw Marianne's father leaning against a tree. He was overweight, too, but had an agreeable look on his face. "Where's your mother?" Deborah asked.

"She didn't come."

"That's too bad. I was hoping to get to know her."

"She's got better things to do."

Deborah got up and walked toward Marianne's father. She would see if she could discover in him some clue to this girl's rude behavior. You would think she would try especially hard to be friendly, considering she had absolutely no physical attraction. The pimples on her face looked like warts. Deborah remembered Allison at that age. Allison was always pleasant. There was nothing about Allison that worried Deborah except her lack of religion. When she got to high school, she refused to go to church with Deborah. "If you don't like the Methodist church," Deborah had told her, "you can go to the Baptist with one of your friends." But Allison had not gone to church with her friends. Right before Allison went off to college, Deborah plainly told her she hoped she would look into her soul and find a need to attend church over in Atlanta.

Now she was a half year out of college and still not attending. She was sweet about helping with the chores when she got home from teaching, but on Sundays Deborah didn't see her till the middle of the afternoon. She worried Allison's soul was going to burn in hell.

Three Sundays ago, Deborah had knocked on Allison's bedroom door after breakfast and said, "I wish you'd ride me over to church today. I'm feeling a little off and don't want to drive."

Allison opened her door. She wore a pretty green dress and slippers and held a book against her chest, marking her place with a finger.

"Why don't you put on some nice shoes and go with me?" Deborah said.

"What time do you want to leave?"

They arrived punctually, ten minutes before eleven. But when Allison dropped Deborah at the church door, she said, "I'll be back at noon."

The next week Deborah feigned a twisted ankle. "If you don't stay for the service, June will insist on driving me home," Deborah said.

"Tell her I'm coming back for you."

"She'll use her cell phone to call you and tell you not to come." Deborah knew that of all her friends, June was the one Allison disliked. Allison thought she was a know-it-all, and she was, but she was a hard worker and a pretty woman. The day Allison received the letter announcing she had won a scholarship to college, June had been in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee with Deborah. Allison came running with the opened envelope, waving the letter in her hand.

"I got the scholarship!" she said.

Though Deborah had given Allison a big hug and a broad smile, inside she was crying. She had hoped Allison would stay home and go to the trade school in Dahlonega. June had looked right at Allison and said,

"You? Going off to college? You're the kind of girl who doesn't know which way to point her umbrella on a windy day! Practical education is what you need. Not more books."

Deborah had looked hard at June, who hadn't said anything else except, "I guess you'll be a good student."

When Allison came down the stairs that second Sunday, she wore a church dress. She attended the service. The following Sunday, Deborah was out of pretenses. Allison stayed behind her closed door, reading.

As Deborah made her way across the grass to Brad's brother, she felt Marianne staring at her. She glanced back one time. The girl all but stuck out her tongue. Deborah smoothed the front of her dress over her slim figure and walked a little taller. She'd always been admired for her good posture and for her pretty blue eyes. She didn't need to wear a smudge of makeup because she had natural color in her face and lips. One of her high school boyfriends never did believe she didn't wear lipstick.

Deborah made pleasant conversation with Marianne's father. He explained that his wife hadn't come because she was involved in a garden club fundraiser.

"But Marianne came with you," she said.

"She had other ideas about what she'd like to do. I hope she'll talk to your daughter. She's such a nice young lady and a school teacher, I hear."

"The children love her," Deborah said.

About then Beth rang a bell and everyone moved toward the food table.

Deborah hurried over to where Allison stood next to Beth, put her arm around her daughter's waist and moved with her to a place in line behind Marianne. Deborah perceived herself as a compassionate person and couldn't understand why this girl had taken such a dislike to her.

"Marianne, you remember my daughter, Allison, don't you," she said.

"Of course."

"She's teaching school now."

"I know."

"She's living with me and is such a big help with the hens, and in general. It's a delight to have a daughter. I bet your mom feels the same way."

"No."

"Why, of course she does! Every mother loves having a young lady around. It makes life worth living to see her pretty face every morning and to know she needs you and you need her and that you understand each other."

Marianne screwed her face up into something that looked like the spitballs children used to throw across the classroom when teachers stepped out into the hall for a conversation. Deborah remembered Oscar Jones throwing one at her. It hit her in the middle of the cheek and left a slimy wet spot as it fell to her desktop. "Quit asking so many questions!" Oscar had yelled at her.

"What kind of hobbies do you have, Marianne?" Deborah asked.

The trio inched closer to the buffet as Deborah conversed. Marianne, now first in line, reached abruptly for a glass of iced tea, turned on her heel to face Deborah, and tossed the contents of the glass into Deborah's face. "Maybe that'll cool you off, you dried up old wattle-throated biddy!" she said.

Deborah nearly fell back into Allison's arms. But she righted herself and dried her face with a paper napkin Allison handed her. "Let's fix our plates," Allison said. Nearly all the relatives were seated already at picnic tables and did not note the commotion. Those few behind Deborah were turned toward Brad, the last one in line, who was entertaining them with his harmonica.

Before Deborah finished wiping her eyes, Marianne disappeared. Deborah glanced down at her checkered blouse. The spots of tea blended in with the pattern. She spoke no word during lunch. Allison carried the conversation. Despite her better sense of decorum, Deborah took only one bite of her meal, pushed the colorful little heaps of vegetables around, and disposed of her plate as soon as she was able to get her wits about her and stand up. She told Allison to gather up their casserole dish and bowls and meet her at the car. Deborah left the party without any goodbyes.

The drive home seemed long and winding. Deborah felt a little nauseated and tried closing her eyes, but each time her lids fell shut, they became the backdrop of a farce. She, dressed in a feathered clown costume, tall and lean, wore exceedingly long flat shoes. Around her danced a fat little troll with a handful of spitballs.

At home, she did not pause in the kitchen but mounted the stairs and closed her door. She heard Allison washing the picnic casserole and bowls and putting them away. Deborah removed her spotted checkered blouse and white skirt and placed them in the bathroom sink to soak in cold

water. She put on work clothes and walked to the hen house. When she opened the door, she stood very still and studied her chickens. "Dried up old wattle-throated bitty!" she said aloud.

The chickens turned their heads and examined her. Their red wattles swayed from side to side with the movement of their heads, pendulous. Deborah inadvertently reached for her own throat. She studied the pretty white feathers and lean bodies of her Leghorns. Usually they clucked incessantly, but her inaction must have astounded the birds. They stared at her silently. A moment later, as if satisfied with what they saw, they turned dismissively from her and began their usual loud communication. Stray feathers floated above their heads, suspended in the afternoon light, seemingly buoyed by the chickens' raucous clucking. Deborah didn't bother to check for eggs but slammed the henhouse door and marched to the house. She disappeared into her room and went to bed.

On Sundays Deborah fed her chickens early. She fixed her breakfast, washed up the dishes, and always showered at quarter to eight. She took a little extra time with her appearance on the Lord's day. She preferred the eleven o'clock service to the eight o'clock because it offered more music and a longer sermon. After she dressed, she always sat in the living room reading her Bible until it was time to go. When the weather was nice, she walked. Her church was just down the hill from her drive, about a mile on the left. But today she lingered over her cup of tea. The cuckoo clock her father had bought her when she was a girl struck a quarter to eight, but she did not stir from the kitchen table. The room was silent as a tomb. She closed her eyes and her chin dropped to her breast. A creak of the floorboard caught her attention. She opened her eyes and saw Allison standing above her in a church dress and pretty pumps.

"Would you like to go to church with me?" Allison said.

"What time is it?" Deborah asked, feeling as if the morning had somehow gotten away from her.

"Not yet eight. I go to the early service. Can you be ready in a few minutes?"

"The early service?" Deborah said.

"Yes. Usually you're in the shower when I leave."

"But I'm not dressed."

"Your sunflower dress is hanging in the laundry room."

"I still need to press it."

Allison looked calmly at her mother. Deborah rose, dashed to the laundry room, where she slipped the floral dress over her head and tied the sash at the waist. She ran up the stairs for shoes. The two women pulled up to the church just as the eight o'clock bells rang. They took a seat on the back pew. Allison held a well-worn Bible in her hand.

It was a communion Sunday. When the time came for them to go to the rail, Deborah walked slowly up the aisle. She didn't look from side to side to smile at old friends as she was accustomed to doing at eleven o'clock, nor did she check the length of the dress in front of her or the polish on the shoes. At the rail, she took the communion wafer from the minister. She attempted to swallow it, but it lodged in her dry throat. The little glass of grape juice was not enough to loosen it. She coughed once, and up came the wafer into her hand. She slipped it again into her mouth and held it there on her tongue as she walked back down the aisle to her pew. A peace came over her as she slowly moved toward the back of the church. She had

no concern for who sat where. She looked up at the window that faced East. Always, she had been bothered that the church was built with its altar at the west end of the sanctuary. But today she was glad. Walking toward the back of the church, she looked out at the morning sun. Its rays refracted through plain glass panes and fell in clean spots of white on her face and breast. She raised her hands to her breast and touched the warmth of the sun. When she got to the pew, Deborah sat down and closed her eyes. Allison took her seat again beside her mother. She touched Deborah's hand with her own and left it lightly resting there, nearly hovering above her mother's. The two women sat in silence on the back pew of the church, both with closed eyes. They could hear each other's breath, and they could feel the sun on the backs of their heads. They sat very still. They sat while other church members moved to the door. The two women remained on the pew for quite some time, until long after the church emptied.

Kay Exley Gunkel has worked as a newspaper journalist, an innkeeper, office clerk and a tour guide. An avid solo long-distance walker, she recently completed a novella inspired by her walks along the Camino de Santiago and the South West Coast Path of England. She has also finished a novel set both in Savannah, Georgia, and the Alps of Austria. Kay's work has been published by *Narrative*, *the Anglican Theological Review* and the *Sewanee Review*.

FICTION

Pamela Sharp

The Face-Up Check

Every Sunday, the deacons passed the basket.

To pay the utilities and the mortgage and the cleaning service and the salaries of the minister and the associate minister and to provide for the mission work at home and abroad and to buy a replacement hymnal when a three-year-old with crayons sat still and quiet as instructed and drew pictures in an old one —

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" sung through swaths of red, green and yellow. Some people had a good laugh over that. Others? Not so much.

Anyway —

Every Sunday near the end of the service, the deacons passed the basket.

And they always passed it in the same way, front to back, starting on the right, because that was the smoothest pattern to collect the money and take it to the lockbox for counting and securing, all without disturbing the final stanza of the offertory hymn.

Even routine tasks took a certain amount of planning, practice, and timing. That's what deacon training was for.

So, this Sunday, once again, the deacons passed the basket.

And this Sunday, once again, as she had done for the past handful of Sundays, Marijane looked for the check that came from the other end of her pew. This Sunday, once again, the check was there. Flat, face-up, filled-out, settled on top of the small, embarrassed collection, a light-green check with one of those mountain-scene backgrounds embedded in the paper. Exposing itself to all eyes.

Marijane tossed in her family's folded envelope — a closed and folded envelope, mind you! — and handed the basket to the waiting deacon who stepped to the pew behind her.

She missed the cue to bow her head and pray and had to catch up.

***

"It isn't as if we don't give!"

Warren, her husband, was opening a can of pinto beans because he happened to have a fondness for pinto beans. He responded to this out-of-the-blue comment with, "What?"

"I was saying that isn't as though we don't give every Sunday!" said Marijane.

"Yeah. We do," he agreed. He dumped the beans into the smaller of the pans on the stovetop.

"We give our ten percent!" she said.

"More like eight," he corrected her.

"It all adds up!" she insisted.

"It sure does!" agreed Warren. He adjusted the strength of the stovetop burner. It was electric.

"It isn't as though we need everybody in the world to know how much we give!" said Marijane.

"Only the IRS," said Warren, "for the tax deduction."

"That's why I put the check in the envelope and fold the envelope!" said Marijane. "Because everybody in the world does not need to see how much we give!"

"I've never understood why you fold it, though?" he asked her now that the subject had arisen. "Once it's in the envelope, nobody can see it anyway?"

"Oh, eat your beans, Warren!" she told him irritably and left the kitchen.

***

They hadn't placed official membership with the church, the Newman family. Technically, they were still just visitors. Visitors who had walked into the service and taken seats on the other end of her pew for ... how long now? Two months? Or was it closer to three?

You'd think these people would have made up their minds about joining by now, wouldn't you?

Obviously, they were still judging the church on a trial basis to see if it suited them or not. Judging the members to see if they suited them or not.

It's insulting! thought Marijane.

And why were mere visitors giving as much as they gave every week?

It was condescending, really, when Marijane thought about it.

Marijane had begun to think about it quite a lot.

She detoured to that end of the pew and smiled and made a point of greeting the Newmans before she joined Warren on their own end of the pew. She took one of the small envelopes from the tray on the pew just ahead of them where such items as hymnals and Bibles and prayer request cards were made available. She filled out her check, put it inside the envelope, sealed and folded the envelope, and set it aside for later in the service.

"I think she has a Gucci bag."

"What?" asked Warren.

"Her purse. I think it's a Gucci. Unless it's a fake," whispered Marijane.

"Okay," said Warren. Then asked, "Who has?"

"Mrs. Newman! The new people at the end of our pew!" she hissed with impatience.

"Not that new," said Warren. "They've been coming for a couple of months now. Haven't you noticed?" he asked.

"Yes, Warren, I've noticed," said Marijane frostily, annoyed at how clueless her husband could be. "Do you know what kind of car —?"

The piano notes requesting everyone's attention played out. The congregation turned to the front and settled into silence.

This Sunday, Marijane waited through the sermon until the deacons passed the basket. She was anxious to get to it.

The green check was there, face-up and flat open, sitting on the top of the offering, made out for the same amount as last week. And the week before that. And the week before that.

Marijane dropped her folded envelope on top of it.

She was sorry she'd folded the envelope; it didn't cover as much.

Next Sunday she wouldn't fold it.

***

There were always extra "opportunities" for the congregation to give ... extra needs for the church to meet ....

Turkeys and canned goods at Thanksgiving ... angel tree gifts at Christmas ... food pantry donations all year round ....

Requests for something extra to help others in need.

This Sunday, a representative from a local Homeless Shelter was making a plea for funds.

"People tend to be generous in cold weather, and during the holidays, but people need meals and a bed all year long ..." the representative reminded them.

Marijane took cash from her purse for the purpose. Like her weekly family check, she put this contribution, too, into an envelope and sealed it – but she did not fold it. On the front of the envelope, she wrote "Homeless Shelter" with one of the small pencils also provided in the back of the pew.

Two envelopes from their family would go into the basket today. Two envelopes. Neither one of them folded.

Marijane was prepared.

The moment arrived. The usual prayer was prayed for gratitude, generous hearts, and the wise use of church resources. The deacons took the empty baskets out to the congregation. Pew by pew, the baskets were passed.

The basket came down her pew from the far-right, through the middle, to Warren, who passed it to her —

Two light-green checks lay flat and face-up in an "X" pattern that left the amounts of both checks clearly visible.

Marijane laid her envelopes forcefully across the "X" so that neither check nor its amount was visible. She handed the basket to the waiting deacon — who looked at her with raised eyebrows.

She'd been spotted.

***

"I'd just like to think that what we give matters a little!"

Warren, in the act of changing his clothes in preparation for mowing the grass, paused.

"What?"

"I'd just like to think that what we give matters! It may not be as much as some others give, but I'd like to think that it matters a *little*!"

"Give ...?" asked Warren.

"To the *church*, Warren! Where we were today!" said Marijane with great exasperation.

"Did someone say it didn't?" he asked reasonably.

"No, of course not!"

"Then —?"

"Oh, *never mind*! You don't understand!"

Very true.

Warren went out to mow the grass. Grass was pretty easy to understand. It grew too long, and you cut it to make it shorter. Mowing would be a comfort to him.

***

The timing was such that the Newman family drove into the church parking lot just as Marijane was about to enter the building. Finally, she had her chance to notice what sort of car they drove.

Her stomach tightened. The sun glinted off the seemingly spotless black paint of a new-model luxury car.

What else would these people drive except a new-model luxury car?

All four of the family got out of the luxury car together. Him and her and the two children.

Those children get every single thing their hearts desire, don't they? Every single thing! decided Marijane in that instant. *Children are starving all over the world. Children are starving in our own country! But those children get everything they could possibly want. Don't they?!*

It only stood to reason.

If those people drove here in that type of car and filled in that amount on their check every week – how much more could they spend on their spoiled-rotten children!

"Nice car," remarked Warren, looking where his wife was looking – but not seeing the same thing at all. "Reminds me ... can we swap cars tomorrow and you take mine in for an oil change?"

Marijane glared at him.

"Are you crying?" asked Warren, seeing a glint of moisture in her eyes.

She couldn't even smile at people on her way to her seat in the pew.

She filled out their family check for less this week just because she could. Just to say to herself that she could have given more if she'd chosen to give it – but she didn't choose to.

Somehow, that made her feel better.

When Warren handed the basket to her, the light-green check with the mountain-scene imprint lay on top, face-up and flat, as she had come to expect it. She laid her envelope deliberately over the check to cover it, to smother it, to make it go away. Then she stared at the waiting deacon as though daring him to react.

The deacon merely took the basket and moved on.

At the end of the service, when the invitation to embrace the faith, place membership, or request the prayers of the church was made, the Newman family stepped forward to officially place their membership.

They'd finally made up their minds.

They were hailed from the pulpit as a welcome addition to the congregation. It looked like they would be staying for a while.

***

The next Sunday morning, Marijane surprised her husband by not sitting where they always took a seat. She walked down the aisle several rows further, several pews ahead, before she nodded to a woman she hardly knew and sat beside her, letting Warren follow as he would.

"Why did you —?" Warren began the natural question.

"We're changing seats," she informed him shortly. "We'll be sitting closer to the front from now on."

He shrugged, but didn't argue. Church was Marijane's department in their marriage.

"Yes, indeed, we will *certainly* be sitting closer to the front!" repeated Marijane.

No light-green check lay flat in the basket this time when it reached her. She had outdistanced that check by several pews!

And just look at that ragged twenty-dollar bill someone had dropped in there. That poor excuse for an offering —!

Marijane breathed more easily this Sunday than she had done for a number of Sundays. She casually dropped in her closed envelope, and the deacon moved on.

Next week she would go back to folding it.

Pamela Sharp lives in Arlington, Texas, with her husband and son. She is eligible for the senior discount in most restaurants. Pamela has a self-published trilogy on Kindle and one short story in a published anthology. Writing makes her feel better about … pretty much everything.

FICTION

Megan Preston Meyer

Stuck on Open

Nancy Caldecott was wearing her parka. It may not have been completely necessary, but Nan was not one for subtlety. It was cold outside, and the sliding glass door that led into the waiting room was stuck on Open. Now it was cold inside, too.

She had called Facilities Management more than three hours ago, and Reggie wasn't there yet. Granted, he had to drive out from the main hospital, about forty minutes away, and the roads weren't great, but the door was stuck on Open, and it had been all morning.

***

The door was stuck on Open, but that hadn't turned the chirping off. Usually, if someone came in, the whooshing of the door announced them before the chirping did, but without the whoosh, there was just the chirp. The door had chirped a lot that morning, and Nan kept looking over from the desk, but she never saw anyone. On the fifth chirp, she got up to investigate.

It was a cat. A stray cat had come in, out of the cold. It walked nonchalantly into the clinic, back toward the largest of the three examining rooms, the only one that was occupied.

"Uh-uh," said Nan, catching up to the cat. She scooped it into her arms, ready to bring it back to the entrance, and then she saw the others. There were two more cats, a dog, and a racoon, huddled around the examining room door.

"What on earth ...?" she said to herself. It was because the door was stuck on Open.

It took her ten minutes to shoo all the animals away. She had to pick up each one, even the racoon, and carry it outside. All that back and forth, into the cold, and, plus, she didn't want to get her scrubs dirty: that was when Nan had put on her parka. It was turning out to be a busy day.

***

It was turning out to be a busy day, and it had been a busy night, too; when she showed up for her shift, the night nurse told Nan that the main hospital's maternity ward had been on diversion. Their clinic was rural but modern, and Room 3 could be used as a birthing suite.

The door chirped again. Nan looked over, and it wasn't a cat. Six men had come in carrying lunchboxes and coolers. They were also in parkas, but theirs were high-vis.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" Nan said. "Is one of you hurt?"

"No, ma'am, we're fine," one of them said. "We're working nearby and wondered if we might have our lunch in here."

"We usually eat in our trucks," said one of the others, "but it's cold out today."

"It's cold in here, too," Nan said. "because the door's stuck on Open. But go ahead — just don't leave a mess."

They settled themselves into the chairs in the waiting room and took out sandwiches and soup. It was quiet for a moment as everyone chewed, and then the sound of crying came out from Room 3.

"Is that a baby?" asked one of the men. "Could we go see it?"

***

"You should have seen it, Reg," Nan said. Reggie had shown up as the men were leaving, stepping aside to let them through the sliding glass door as they walked back out to their trucks. "All six of them crammed together. Room 3 isn't that big, and they weren't small."

"Must have been something," Reggie said, taking off his coat.

"You might want to leave it on," Nan said. "It's cold in here."

Reggie went to work on the door.

He was still working on it when the black car pulled up. It was a large car, a sedan, and as soon as it parked, all four doors opened, as well as the trunk. The passengers went and pulled parcels out of it, and the driver walked inside the clinic.

"Hello," he said to Reggie. He scanned the waiting room. "Afternoon, ma'am." He glanced back at the door. "Can this entrance be secured?"

"Not right now," said Reggie, and Nan shook her head: The door was stuck on Open. The passengers filed in, one after the other. They nodded

cordially to Reggie, and then to Nan, and then walked straight down the hall to Room 3.

"Is there another exit?" asked the driver. Nan told him there was, and he pulled the car around back. They didn't see them leave.

***

They didn't see them leave, but a half an hour later, they saw the black sedan's taillights as it pulled out onto the road. The afternoon shadows were stretching long, and the midwinter sun gleamed gold.

"Did you get it fixed finally, Reg? It's feeling warmer in here." Nan took off her parka.

"No, ma'am," Reggie said, packing his tools. "I've never seen anything like it. It's switched on to Manual, and you can shut it if you want ... but the door is stuck on Open."

Megan Preston Meyer is a founding editor of *Via Media Review* and the author of five books, including the *Supply Jane & Fifo Adventures*, *Firebrand*, and *Max Entropy & The Avalanche*. Her work has appeared in publications like *Forward Day by Day*, *An Unexpected Journal*, and *Trivium Magazine.* You can read more of her essays, sermons, and stories about faith at **Glad of the Gourd** on Substack.

FICTION

Rachael Payne

The Only Judge

Startled, I opened my eyes and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. A moment ago, I was in my home reading my Bible. I closed my eyes for an instant and when I opened them, I found myself ... where exactly? I did not know. I was on a dusty street between two mud brick houses.

I jumped as the door to the house next to me burst open and three men ambled out dragging a woman behind them.

"Adulteress," One of them said.

I gasped with realization. Somehow, I found myself in the Bible passage I had been reading. The men passed by, not even noticing me, but as the woman passed, I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach. I was looking at *myself*.

Like a disembodied spirit, I followed the mob and watched as they threw me to my knees in front of a man teaching the crowds.

"Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses commands us to stone such women. What do you say?" The leader of the mob said.

I held my breath as I waited to hear what the teacher would say.

"We've got him now," said a man nearby.

"He calls the likes of these his friends," another replied.

Ignoring the mutterings, the teacher answered, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

The whispers and grumbles ceased; everyone was silent. Finally, the silence was broken by a loud clatter as an older man dropped his stone to the ground and walked away. More followed until the entire crowd disappeared, but I did not feel relieved. A great disgust rose throughout my being as I saw who I really was for the first time: a despicable creature who had spit in God's face and deserved judgment.

I picked up one of the abandoned stones, hatred surging through every vein in my body, but before I could cast it, a strong hand gripped my arm. The teacher stood before me, not even allowing me to throw my stone of judgment at myself.

"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone," he said again, looking into my eyes.

He let go of my arm, and I let the stone clatter to the ground; I finally understood that there is only one judge, and he was standing before me.

I closed my eyes once more, and when I opened them, I was no longer on the dusty street, but back in my home. My Bible was opened before me.

Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and from now on sin no more."

I finished the passage with tears streaming down my face, myself a sinful woman, guilty and shameful, yet casting all my hope on Jesus.

Rachael Payne lives in Lynchburg, VA, with her husband, baby daughter, and retired military working dog. Currently, she is an online student at Liberty University pursuing her bachelor's degree in creative writing and Christian literature. Rachael enjoys reading, writing, and taking long walks with her family.

FICTION

Chris Cottom

The Better of Us

The captain's on the loudspeaker, saying something about seatbelts and turbulence. I fumble with the buckle, and you lean across to help, as composed as you'd been on your father's arm at St Mark's forty years ago, with the nation still limping from the Great War.

The stewardess had given us a lovely smile at the top of the steps. "Welcome aboard, sir. Welcome aboard, madam. First stop, the Holy Land." She'd probably noticed my clerical collar. I told her it's our first trip in an aeroplane, our first time abroad, a magnificent retirement gift from my parishioners. I ask you now whether we should tell her, if the captain calls 'Mayday Mayday,' that I'll be quivering and useless, unable to minister to anyone. You smile and shake your head, take my hand and hold it tight.

You've always been the better of us.

Right from the start, you chaired the Flower Guild, the Young Wives Group and, even before becoming eligible yourself, the Mothers' Union. You took immediate charge of the vicarage's two henhouses and their dozen or so residents, the pond on which four white ducks held their daily business meetings, and that irascible nanny goat, Proserpina. It wasn't long before we added the stray ginger tom we named Ptolemy and the cocker spaniel puppy we called Sheba, who I had to ban from my study after she gnawed the spine of my ancient Book of Common Prayer.

Before we'd celebrated our second wedding anniversary, you presented me with our fine son, Roland, following a labour in which you feared you'd screamed loud enough to waken the churchyard dead.

You taught the Apostles' Creed to the grubby-kneed boys and smock-frocked girls of the Sunday School; you visited the poor with a basket on your arm, dispensing eggs and kindness, and tracts from Scripture. You fortified the Deanery Synod with Madeira cake and honey biscuits for its deliberations around our dining-room table. You served tirelessly as Little Pulford's Billeting Officer; plucked geese for the Annual Choirman's Supper; and made chasubles, altar frontals, and that glorious Girls' Brigade banner with golden tassels. In the evenings you embroidered hassocks and repaired surplices until your eyes grew weary.

Me? I baptised and buried, married hopeful couples, preached a thousand sermons. I had lots of meetings.

It's gone ever so quiet, and the sun on the silver wing is as fierce as refining fire. I swallow and start to say how worried I am if Our Lord should call you home first, whether I'll remember to feed the cats or if Easter is early or late, but my ears are aching and, ever prepared, you hand me a boiled sweet. I can't hear myself speak and realise it doesn't matter that you probably can't hear me, because you'll already know what I want to say: that I've tried to comfort too many people through their pain and grief, and it's how I know, if you go first, my love, that I'll be inconsolable.

Chris Cottom is a recovering insurance copywriter with recent work in *Banshee*, *Barrelhouse*, *Fictive Dream*, *matchbook*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *New World Writing Quarterly*, *Orange Blossom Review*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Good Life Review*, *Tiny Molecules*, and elsewhere. Catch him pedalling around Cheshire, UK, and at chriscottom.wixsite.com/chriscottom

NONFICTION

NONFICTION

Javen Bear

Split the Skies

I have been taught to wait for the Lord in hope. And there are some afternoons I wish J.C. would just go ahead and come back, split the azure blue open, finish this thing up.

I am sitting in my office on one such afternoon. A bona fide psychotherapist, almost. I have a few months left in the four-year clinical program. I have oodles of theoretical knowledge and about three ounces of actual experience. A mechanic who's read a lot of manuals, hung out in some garages, never dropped an engine. We talked about our families in class. We read the textbooks. We did the counselor-client role play. And now, finally, it is time to step into the arena. We are matadors with messenger bags full of flags; we've never seen a bull.

Not long after taking my first job as a therapist in training, I read the case file of a young man I'll call Sammy. I feel a tingling fear. The electronic health record reads like a rap sheet. This poor juvenile has been abused physically, verbally, God knows how else. He's punched, kicked, bit, screamed at, and otherwise menaced the adults and children within reach. Foster homes, group homes, psyche wards. I wonder which of my shiny flags might best wave healing over this young man.

I glance at Sammy on my appointment list for the afternoon, a technician tasked with rebuilding the exploded Challenger space shuttle. *Lord, if you ride in on the clouds before this appointment, that would be fine.* I reconsider my office setup. Should I sit on the couch and have Sammy

take my chair? This would provide a quicker escape if he starts attacking me. I try to remember how big a thirteen-year-old is. At six-two, I probably have a few pounds of advantage. Or maybe he won't show up. I'll get the message from the front desk. He's attacked someone else and won't be coming to the appointment. Ah well.

During my internship, my supervisor once told me that therapy is about giving the client a new experience. He said, "Relate to them in a new way to help them shake out of old patterns of behavior and interaction." He is a well-seasoned therapist. *Does watching your therapist flee in terror count as a new experience?*

Dinggggggg. The front desk messages to say he's arrived. *Lord? The skies? No?*

I run my hands through my hair, take a breath, rise from my office chair. I retrieve Sammy from the waiting room. "Hey there! Follow me to my office!" *On second thought, maybe walk in front where I can see you.*

He's smaller than I thought. Good. Pretty shrimpy, actually. I could definitely take him, unless he's biting. We make some small talk. *Ok, he's not so bad.* I draw some things on the whiteboard, and he engages very responsively. *Ok, this kid is actually like super nice.* He's paying attention, answering questions, being very kind. *Was I reading the right file?* I start to relax a bit.

There is a certain hubris in providing therapy to kids like Sammy. He's been through more therapists than he can even count. Then there are the psychiatrists, doctors, coaches, case managers, graduate students. He's already had every flag in the arsenal waved at him. His parents are at their wit's end during the initial consultation. But hey, I read some books, let

me take a crack at him. *I'll give him a new experience! I'm not like the other therapists, Sammy. We can do this!*

"Let's play Uno!" I tell him. *Pretty cool, huh? Therapist letting you play games in the first session.* I've gone from hoping he doesn't attack me to wanting him to like me. As I sit down into my deep chair, Uno deck in hand, the peace of our session is shattered. What started out as a miracle of tranquility is turned upside down by the most terrifying sound in Western culture. A shriek. A scream. The primal wail of a pair of blue chinos slowly outgrown.

Sweet mother of ripppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppp!!!!!!!

Sammy's gaze centers upon the cavern between my legs. A clothlike formation of shredded navy cotton, boxer shorts, upper thigh.

This is not along the lines of the innocent rip of a few threads sighing in protest. This is a massive gaping hole where my crotch has been split wide open. Lord, wrong azure blue. Suddenly, the idea of me being the expert feels quite foolish. We are just two travelers who have stumbled into the same room, a whole string of trouble, self-doubt, and good intentions winding out behind us. We laugh. I phone my wife for another pair of pants. We play cards together.

Sammy will become one of my favorite clients. He is honest, hardworking, sincere. He never misses his appointment. He's been through more than most kids his age, or my age. He's deeply kind to me.

Months later, he tells me in a subsequent session that he'd never had a therapist split their pants open. So, I suppose that clinically speaking, yes, this has been a new experience for the lad.

Javen Bear lives with his family in Savannah, Georgia where he works as a therapist at an adolescent clinic. When patients don't show up for their session and when his child goes to bed on time, he writes! More of his work is found at javenbear.com.

NONFICTION

Justin B. Rapp

SAME

My Wife Told Me She's Not Sure She'd Choose Me Again. I Told Her The Truth.

The digital clock switched over to 10:29 pm. The kids, just barely asleep after what was too late of a night. I opened my laptop to finish an email for work I never got to after dinner. My wife filled the tea kettle to boil water to clean and sanitize the sink. A nightly ritual that seems insignificant, and yet carries real value.

"I think there is no way I would be with you today, knowing what I know, five years into marriage," my wife whispered in an almost guilty admittance.

The typical husband's response might be "Why?" Or "I want to understand that better." But here, at this moment, I met her with a simple, "Same." Because that is the truth. Five years into a marriage, I've had plenty of moments when I did not 'like' my wife, and I know she's had her fair share as well.

But like is not love. And love is why we stay.

If a stranger were listening in on our conversation, the logical conclusion would have been something along the lines of: "These people are no longer in love. They should really consider counseling." Or, most extreme, "They should honestly evaluate their marriage and determine the best way

forward for them to find more happiness." If that were the response of a nosy stranger listening in from the other side, then I would argue the stranger truly doesn't understand love.

We have defined love as a feeling. A sensation to be captured. When looking up the word on Merriam-Webster, I got a range of definitions, and yet missing from the list and not recorded in any of the eight meanings was the daily action of sacrificing self for the betterment and sustainment of something else.

Love is not what we feel; it's what we do. And we do not need to feel it to do it.

I do not need to feel love for my wife (although I often do) in order to enact love towards her. How could it be a feeling if we are called to 'love our enemies' (Matthew 5:44) if love is isolated to a sensation rather than an action?

So when my wife spoke into existence her uncertainty about whether she would have said 'yes' at the altar if she now (five years into our marriage and all the wiser) could do it all over again, I am not surprised. You don't stay in a marriage because it's a never-ending honeymoon; you stay because you do the daily work and action of loving the other.

I try my best to love my wife because that is the commitment I have made and what is needed to sustain and better our relationship. Our marriage was a choice, but the sustainment of that marriage is yet another choice. The choice to perform the action of love to the best of our abilities.

The world will slowly take its toll on a marriage. It's inescapable. Sometimes, it can burst open at the seams, but more often than not it's the slow piling of small grievances. The absence of a morning kiss that

makes one not feel seen. The disagreement over how we handled our daughter not sitting at the dining table that makes you feel like you're not on the same team. The inconvenient lunch with an old friend that takes the other by surprise and makes them feel like they weren't included. Each little slight piles up like dirty dishes in the sink. They are the small papercuts to the feeling of love, with time conquering all in its wake. Enough small cuts. Enough time. And the feeling of love when you said "I do" seems more like a fleeting moment. Because that is exactly what it was. A fleeting sensation.

But the departure of the sensation reveals another type of love that was always the foundation. The love that is the daily labor of 1 Corinthians 13. The hard work to be patient, kind, truthful, and honor our partner without envy, pride, or self-service. And when we enact love, truly, we are able to restore some of the wounds we have made. To wash away the transgressions we have inflicted on the other, back to a place of relationship equilibrium. Back to a clean slate. Only to then do what love begs of us. To wake up the next day. Endure the transgressions again. And go about the hard work of undoing them through our actions.

I closed my laptop and walked over to embrace my wife. A silent hug acknowledging the day's work she had endured. The embrace, cut short by the kettle's hum in our kitchen. My wife reached for the burner to extinguish the flame before the singing woke the kids sleeping in the other room. She lifted the steaming spout and poured. As the hot water hit the sink, it carried away the day's worth of leftover food. The bacteria. The grime. Each piece was slowly caught up in the washing. Caught up in the cleansing until the sink was fresh again. Ready for another day of use and the eventual leftover food and grime that will once again inhabit it. But just for a moment. There is nothing. That is until tomorrow. When she once again will pour out the hot water.

Not because it's easy, but because it's what's needed.

Justin B. Rapp is a husband, father, and writer on Substack. He writes about his daily failures so that others might learn from his mistakes. He's a man on the journey to become a better leader of his house and a closer follower of Christ each day.

NONFICTION

David Gourgues

The Question God Never Answered

Tonight, while watching an old episode of Aaron Sorkin's early-2000s television drama *The West Wing*, I found myself unexpectedly overcome with emotion. The episode, the Season 2 finale, titled "Two Cathedrals," centers on several pivotal moments: the funeral of President Bartlet's secretary, Mrs. Landingham; flashbacks to Bartlet's first meeting with her; and the controversy surrounding his disclosure that he has multiple sclerosis and whether he will run for re-election. One part of this episode hit me with unexpected force as I was struck by Bartlet's response to Mrs. Landingham's death in the National Cathedral. In his grief, he rails at God in both English and Latin, even asking, "Have I displeased you, you feckless thug?"

I understand Bartlet's anger at God after Mrs. Landingham dies in a car crash. In a dream sequence, Mrs. Landingham reminds Bartlet that "God doesn't cause car crashes." She acknowledges that he is facing a difficult moment, but she also challenges him to keep his suffering in perspective: many others are enduring even worse circumstances.

The question, then, becomes deeply personal: Can I continue to love the world — and love, or even believe in, God — without ever receiving a satisfactory explanation for why my first son died?

When our infant son Matthew died nearly 30 years ago, people offered the familiar explanations that often follow tragedy: God has a plan.

Everything happens for a reason. He is in a better place. We are not meant to understand. God only gives you things you can handle.

Some of those words were offered with love, and some may contain a measure of truth. But none of them answers the question a parent carries: why was my son given only 18 days while someone else is given 95 years?

For years, I was angry the way Bartlet was angry — wounded, confused, and unwilling to pretend the loss made sense. I still do not understand why Matthew had to suffer as he did. I do not know why his life was measured in days. And perhaps I never will.

I can say plainly that his death was terrible. I can say, even after almost 30 years, that I wish with everything in me it had never happened. Time has not solved it. Time has not explained it. Time has only taught me how to keep carrying what still cannot be made right.

So, the question remains: How do we keep loving God, life, and this astonishing, terrible world when the answer never comes?

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov argues that a loving God would not allow for the suffering of innocent children. Ivan refuses to accept any ultimate harmony that would somehow justify their suffering. I understand his argument and point of view. My own loss has left me with many of the same questions.

In the chapter "The Grand Inquisitor," Christ returns to Seville during the Spanish Inquisition, where the Grand Inquisitor imprisons him and delivers a long indictment. Christ answers not with an explanation but with a silent kiss. When Ivan finishes the story, his younger brother, Alyosha, responds by kissing him as well. Dostoevsky does not give Ivan

— and perhaps does not give me — the satisfying answer to innocent suffering that I keep seeking. Instead, he offers love.

I keep returning to the same question: why did my son die? Why do terrible things happen in this world, especially to innocent children?

At first, Dostoevsky's answer feels painfully inadequate. A kiss seems too small, too quiet, too incomplete for grief this deep. I want clarity. I want an explanation equal to the pain.

But then something else begins to emerge: love. Not an answer that explains the suffering, but one that meets it. As difficult as that is to accept, it may be the only response that can bear the weight of what cannot be explained.

For thirty years, I have carried anger and still tried to believe in God. I try to go to church regularly. I watch people pray reverently in the pews, and I envy the certainty they seem to possess. At the same time, I find myself wondering whether anyone is listening.

Christmas is still difficult. Matthew was born the day after Christmas, on December 26, and sometimes sitting through Christmas Mass feels like more than I can bear. Time may soften grief, but it does not erase the scars. The first years were the hardest; the grief could not simply be shaken off. I still remember his funeral: my younger brother carrying Matthew's small coffin up the aisle of the large St. John Church, and the emptiness of that cold, rainy January day when we buried him.

I still pray, though doubt feels heavier now than it ever has. Some days it is like a fog so thick I can barely see through it, no matter how hard I reach for gratitude, reason, or hope.

Still, some small part of me refuses to let go. Even if that part is only one percent, it continues to hope there is something beyond the silence. Matthew's death has not convinced me, finally and completely, that God does not exist. Nor has it made me believe the world is unworthy of love.

My family helps save me through love: the love of my wife and children, the life we have built together, and the joys and hardships we have carried along the way. Through it all, Matthew's brief life remains quietly present in the back of my mind.

Maybe faith is not believing that everything happens for a reason. Maybe faith is refusing to make love dependent on an explanation — refusing to demand that the universe, or God, answer for every wound before I will dare to love again.

I still love this world.

I am still grateful to be here.

And I am still searching.

Still searching — and still loving.

David Gourgues is a Louisiana writer and author of *Resurrection Fern: Trying to Understand It All*. His essays explore faith, doubt, grief, love, aging, and the search for meaning. He lives in Baton Rouge with his wife, Peggy, and two stubborn dachshunds, Loki and Louie.

NONFICTION

Maria Manyama

Conversations at the Well

About noon in Samaria ...

He was sitting there alone by the well,
looking tired from his journey.
I had gone to draw water. He said to me,
"Will you give me a drink?"
I was startled.
I stared at him.
Why and how could he — a man, a Jew,
a Jewish man — talk to me, a Samaritan woman,
let alone ask me for a drink?
Does he not know
that we don't associate?
"If you knew the gift of God and Who it is
that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him
and He would have given you living water," he said.
"Sir, you have nothing to draw with
and the well is deep. Where can you get this
living water?" I asked.

"Everyone who drinks this water
will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks
the water I give them will
become a spring of water welling up
to eternal life," he answered.

At this point, I suspected
he did not mean the well's water. But I said,
"Sir, give me this water so I won't get thirsty
and have to keep coming to draw water."

*

With Jesus Christ, you never really know.
You could meet Him anywhere.
Or He could meet you anywhere,
at unexpected places, at an unexpected time.
He could strike up a conversation whenever.
Like He did with the woman at the well.
She didn't know at first that she had just met Jesus.

The woman at the well was a Samaritan woman.
A Bible story in the book of John.
The Samaritan woman would always remember the well
as the place she met Jesus.
But people meet Jesus in different places.
So I asked other women
about the wells where they met Jesus:

I was with some friends, in a church, listening to a sermon
about the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
A wave of sadness and tears washed over me. Out of the blue.
Some of my friends were crying tears of joy and speaking
in languages I was sure they did not previously know.
And I just stood there, in the middle of the prayer,
stuck in a puddle of incomprehensible sadness.

The next day, I still felt troubled.
In prayer, I found myself opening up to whatever He had to say.
He told me that He is what makes me enough.
I opened my Bible and read a verse about the race
we're all running. But even in that, it is He who completes me —
us; He completes the work that has started within us.
Another verse says we may plant a seed, but it is He
who makes it grow. So I was doing a lot, but it is He
who helped me execute and complete it.
I felt a burden lift.

— A high schooler at a church service.

Often, Jesus probes the parts you prefer to hide.
The questions you don't want to ask.
The burdens you don't want to lift.
He deals in difficult conversations.
Why else would He ask the Samaritan woman
about a husband she did not have?

In truth, the Samaritan woman was alone at the well that day for a reason.
She had been married to five husbands
and the man she was living with was not her husband.
She was a Samaritan disgrace.
But Jesus didn't seem to care.

*

Back in Samaria ...

He said to me, "Go, call your husband and come back."

And I told him I didn't have a husband. To which he responded,
"You are right when you say you have no husband.
The fact is, you have had five
and the man you now have is not your husband."

Who is this man, I wondered.

"What you have just said is quite true," he finished.

"Sir, I can see that you're a prophet," I said.

*

But Jesus is more.
Sometimes, a father and a friend.
Sometimes, the open arms of comfort and safety.
The everything when it feels like there is nothing left.

I had always known Him, just not like that.
Not the way the teachers of the Bible seemed to know Him.
I met Him through my mom and dad, through school,
through friends. But we had never really talked. Not directly.
He was an acquaintance. I knew
that He'd been saving lives. But mine
had never needed saving. Until that afternoon.

Everything was in pieces.
My mom, my siblings, my dad.
It was late summer, a few months before college.
He must've been waiting, that whole time. Because
when I locked myself in the room I shared with my sisters
and knelt to pray, He was already there.

I told Him
that He was all I had, that He would be everything to me.
He just nodded in agreement
as I wept into his lustrous hands, holding me.

— A pre-college student in a broken home

Was it Jesus who had been waiting
for the Samaritan woman to come to the well?
Or was it the woman who had been waiting
for the promised Messiah?

Do you ever know what you're yet to find
before meeting Him
or are you both waiting to somehow find each other?
Jesus waiting, as you scurry along
in strange directions.

I grew up believing in God and wanting to follow Him.
But when I think of a significant turning point,
it was in eighth grade.

There was a Maundy Thursday service at my church
in seventh grade and there had been an option to take communion.
And my dad (he was a pastor and was doing communion)
had told me that I could come up
and take communion. I was super excited, 'cause I had never
taken communion before.

But on that night, at the service, for some reason,
I just couldn't get myself to go. I felt pretty disappointed

because I thought, *This is so important,*
I'm doing this for God.
But I couldn't make myself move
and go get it. But I was like, *It's okay,*
there's always next year.
I'll come back next year.

So, then in eighth grade
when Maundy Thursday rolled around again,
I was like, *Okay, it's time to go*
to the Maundy Thursday service.
And my parents were like, nope, we're not going.

I was so disappointed
because this was my redemption moment.
I was supposed to be able to take communion back then,
to do this thing for God,
but now I can't even make up for it.
I was so sad. I was in my room crying,
crying while trying to be quiet, so that I didn't wake people up,
but I also still wanted my parents to hear
so that they could come
and make me feel better.

They didn't come. So I was just by myself
in my room crying
because I felt really disappointed
that I couldn't make up
for what happened the year before.
And it was in that moment
that I felt like, instead of my parents,
God came into my room and sat at the foot of my bed,

kind of like how my mom or dad would have done,
and He was just there with me.

I don't think
He necessarily told me anything
but I just got this strong sense
of God as my Father,
which I had known intellectually
before, but hadn't really
thought about. I think previously I considered God
more as like the Creator, the Guy who exists,
the Guy who protects me.

But this was the first time
that I really experienced God as a father
who loves me as His daughter.

— An eighth grader crying in her room

The first time that He met me, I was nineteen.
Presumably, He had met me before
but I didn't recognize who He was
and perhaps I didn't know who I was
at that time. But the first time I knew
it was Him, I was nineteen.

I had gone through a lot
of disappointment, and I was questioning
a lot about the world
and how it worked, and He met me
with an achievement which I couldn't

have done by myself, by blessings
that I couldn't have achieved by myself.

What He told me
was that 'I've always been there, and
in My time, the things that you are wanting
will happen
so that you would know that it was Me.'

I was like, all glory, honor to God. It's humbling
when it's like that,
when it's all through Him
that everything is done.

The first time it happened,
I chose to follow Him.
The second time it happened,
I chose to serve Him
and I feel like I'm in the period of my third encounter.

He's become my everything.
My provider. I think of when Moses says to God,
What will I say? Who will I say sent me?
and He says, *I Am that I Am.*

— A disappointed young woman

*

The Samaritan woman said, "I know that Messiah
(called Christ) is coming.
When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am He."

*

It's hardly ever the grand moments.
It's the everyday things,
when He can get a second of attention,
that He often decides to meet people.
It would be inaccurate to think there are perfect moments
to meet with Him. They tend to be rather ordinary.

And it's tempting to see these women and think,
Jesus must be an empath, a comforter then.
An emotional safety net.
But that's only one thing on an endless list.
He brings together people
who become each other's emotional safety nets —
friends, mothers, sisters,
brothers, and fathers — and yet, they still hold on to Him.
Sin and evil separates.
He reconciles.
He is like the final puzzle piece you didn't know was missing
until you find it.

Maria Manyama is a recent college graduate from the University of Chicago. She studied Biological Sciences and Creative Writing and is currently on a job hunt. Originally from Tanzania, her work explores the Christian faith and identity through creative nonfiction. She is particularly interested in writing that combines biblical stories and the parallels observed in daily life experiences, to invite curiosity, and conversation among people from different backgrounds.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Liza Moore

ILLUMINED

mixed media on paper



Images are courtesy of the artist.

Fastened to the Sky

pen, acrylic gouache, & mica on watercolor paper



Prayer Under the Dreaming Tree

acrylic on canvas



Liza Moore is an artist and storyteller who resides with her husband and son in Round Rock, TX. She has created three children's books and is currently working on a poetry book. Some of her artwork, poetry, and essays have been published in various journals, including *Fathom Mag*, *Ekstasis Magazine*, *EcoTheo Review*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Thimble Lit Mag*, *Humana Obscura*, *St. Katherine Review*, *Calla Press*, and *Vita Poetica*. To learn more about Liza and her creative work, please visit: https://campsite.bio/liza_moore_art.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Allyiah Miller-Smith

The Backdoor



In It But Not Of It



Images are courtesy of Allyiah Miller-Smith.

About the pieces: My family and I love to take seasonal trips to botanical gardens, some of which have historical landmarks restored. "The Backdoor" is one of these shots. The restored houses of the prairies always draw me in. The house is empty, but the foundations of *home* are still there.

"In It But Not Of It" reminds me that, even though we are all born from dust and dirt, all sinners, if we are saved by grace we become a new creation, fundamentally different from the world. As new creations, we must choose to grow differently in the light of God's Word.

Multi-honors graduate **Allyiah Miller-Smith** holds a BS in Liberal Studies from Texas A&M University – Central Texas and is pursuing an MA in English. A published poet and Tri-Alpha Honor Society Treasurer, she explores life, memory, and meaning through creative arts, photography, and an intellectual interest in thanatology.

Dustin Petersen

Atlas Carries the World to the Church

Atlas in front of the Rockefeller Center in New York City. St. Patrick's Cathedral across the street. November 2010.



BEFORE I DIE

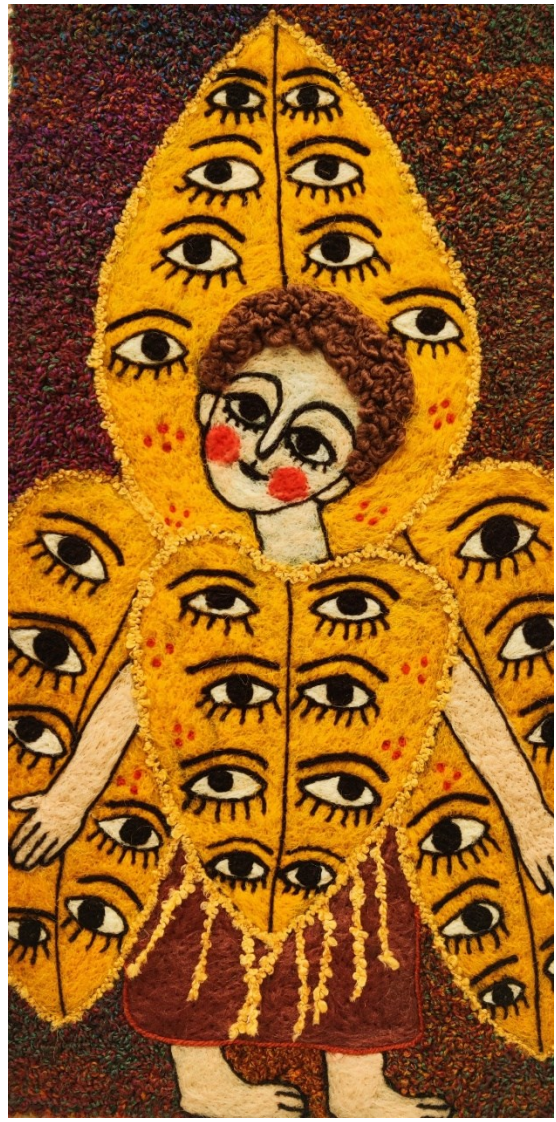
Public-input mural in New York City, October 2011.


Before I die...
Before I die I want to
Before I die I want to
Before I die I want to

Evgeniia Strashko

YELLOW SERAPHIM

felt, wool, and thread; dry felting and hand embroidery
52 × 81 cm (20.5 × 31.9 in)



Crucifixion

felt, knitting yarn; dry felting
126 × 148 cm (49.6 × 58.3 in)



The Winged Bull of the Tetramorph

felt, wool, knitting yarn, cotton thread; dry felting and hand embroidery
58 × 78 cm (22.8 × 30.7 in)



Images are courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement: I make sacred textile images through dry felting and hand embroidery. Wool, felt, yarn, and thread give biblical figures a soft, densely worked surface. In this group, a many-winged seraph, the Crucifixion, and the winged bull of the Tetramorph are built from repeated fibers, loops, stitched lines, stylized faces, and strong outlines.

I work in a naive visual language, using both familiar Christian images and less familiar beings and signs found in Scripture and Christian art. I leave fibers, uneven edges, and traces of handwork visible, so the material remains present alongside the sacred image.

Evgeniia Strashko is an interdisciplinary visual and textile artist based in Woodbridge, New Jersey. Working primarily with dry felting and hand embroidery, she creates sacred images in a naive visual language. Felt, wool, yarn, and thread become Christian figures, biblical creatures, and symbols with dense, tactile, visibly handmade textile surfaces.

Website: https://www.evgeniiastrashko.com/
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/shersheladoll/

Jeremiah Gilbert

Carmelite Church, Balluta Bay, Malta



Church of the Assumption of Our Lady, Mosta, Malta



Basilica and Convent of Santo Domingo, Lima, Peru



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 *Around the World in Eighty Photos*. His most recent, *An Atlas of Ordinary Wonders*: *Travels from the Edge*, a collection of photo essays, is out now. He can be found on Instagram @jg_travels

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jésica Frustaci

ESTHER

watercolor and ink on paper



I.N.R.I.
watercolor and ink on paper



Images are courtesy of the artist.

Jésica Frustaci is a self-taught artist who began her career practicing art therapy. She currently specializes in portraiture. Jésica 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. Jésica 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.

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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