

SHIFT

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“Holy SHIFT”

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Editor's Introduction

Where else could *SHIFT* have focused its third volume's attention but heavenward? The magazine might as well have received its new theme in a vision, so peremptorily did the religious shift commend itself. Like a wonderstruck proselyte—think Saul on the road to Damascus—*SHIFT* felt entrusted with a mission for which, at least this once, it had to be rechristened.

The actual rationale for our religious theme is positively medieval. In *On Christian Teaching*, St. Augustine blends mysticism and mathematics to expound an arcane Biblical number system. Three, according to Augustine, represents the Holy Trinity; the believer's recruitment of heart, soul, and mind in the act of piety; and the tripartition of history with reference to the establishment of God's law. Augustinian exegesis—which encompasses so much more than occult mathematics—greatly influenced the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. I had just learned about *On Christian Teaching* in a graduate seminar when the time came to plan *SHIFT*'s third volume. Thus, while Dr. Jennifer Kates and I mulled a change in theme, Augustinian logic facilitated an Archimedean epiphany. The title *Holy SHIFT*, then, is nothing less than our “Eureka!”

Despite feeling that the new theme was preordained, I suspected that only a few writers would care to reflect on spiritual life in a postmodern (or post-postmodern?) world. But, like Noah preparing to build the ark, I heeded my divine instructions and sounded a call:

For its third volume, SHIFT is coming to Jesus, reaching Nirvana, finding the Way. From Muhammad's prophecy to Rumi's poetry, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Puritan tales to Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic short stories, spiritual and religious writings have added incalculable richness to literary history—and we pray that you'll join the heavenly chorus. Send us your religious autobiography, your wise aphorisms, your Zen koans. Share your hymns, your psalms, your Gospel. Sculpt your devotional poems into metaphysical shapes. Fulminate like Jonathan Edwards. Imagine a new Narnia. Whether you aspire to be the next John Milton or the next L. Ron Hubbard, you have a religious vision, and SHIFT wants to help you share it with the world.

Here and there, the cadences chime with those in Emma Lazarus's “The New Colossus.” I wanted that subliminal rhythmic echo to communicate one of *Holy SHIFT*'s aims: namely, to be a refuge for writers who are still asking sacred questions in irreligious times. Today's academy, far from its medieval roots, equips students to be politically and socially—but not spiritually—conscious. As a result, young adults have become impressively acute in their social insights—and increasingly obtuse about the needs of the spirit. Karl Marx, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault: can these figures, great though they are, help posterity solve the oldest human mysteries? “Better Jehovah than Foucault,” my priestess, Camille Paglia, likes to say. Foucault's paradigms, though useful for any number of social problems, are completely ineffective in times of spiritual crisis. Taking Paglia's maxim to heart, *Holy SHIFT* intended, initially, to send Jehovah into the world that Marx, Derrida, and Foucault (among others) have wrought. But after our call for submissions closed, other exigencies appeared.

Anno Domini 2020, a Negative Strangeness afflicts the globe. Relentless aberrations—COVID-19, quarantine, murder hornets, international cultural ferment—have people thinking about the apocalypse. On social media, an

oft-posted meme of a woman squatting and squinting into the distance reads: “Me looking outside to see what chapter of Revelation we’re doing today.” Whether shared earnestly or ironically, the image seems to communicate an authentic contemporary anxiety: that 2020’s bizarre occurrences—for which the secularity of the preceding decades has ill-prepared us—are the very content of St. John’s vision. Besides the enduring religious texts, what resources exist for those who feel overwhelmed by the quasi-Biblical oddities of the present?

One surefire remedy for a blighting Negative Strangeness is the Positive Strangeness of good art. Walter Pater consecrated strangeness as an aesthetic ideal in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, where Michelangelo’s sonnets are said to share a certain exoticism with the “blossoming of the aloe.” When culling the best literature for *Holy SHIFT*, I wanted Horatian *dulce* to jolt, like the first daub of cold aloe vera on sunburnt skin. Miraculously, *SHIFT*’s contributors—precognizant, it seems, of my secret criterion—administered many such jolts, and made my job easy. In piece after piece, as you will soon discover, a sweet and satisfying Paterian strangeness prevails. But what, ultimately, is strangeness without salutariness, or *dulce* without Horatian *utile*? Reader, you are truly blessed, for each of our highly favored selections provides the most righteous and sanctifying edification.

Indeed, from first page to last, our Chosen Ones salve, save, and surprise. Carolyn Martin’s “The Buddha Walked into a Bar” converts a pub joke into a rendezvous for three of the major *dramatis personae* of the world’s religions. J. W. Heacock’s “Scientific Faith” translates religiosity into sublime neurochemical processes. Jess Bennett queers Hawthorne in “Two Letters from Queer Woods,” and Angel Warwick sugarcoats blasphemy—one of Emily Dickinson’s specialties—in “Chocolate Jesus Spongebath.” Many other riches await you; to name but a few more: the surrealism of K. Shawn Edgar’s “Fluttering in the Darkness,” the melodiousness of Forrest Rapiere’s poetry, and the sapience of the Buddha, Englished by Christopher Carter Sanderson. I would be remiss if I did not also mention that, with the publication of Heather Hickox’s “The Catfish” and “Carbon-Based Beings,” *SHIFT* extends a little grace to itself and achieves redemption.

Now, some words of gratitude. For letting me aim her magazine’s shift in the direction of my choice, Dr. Kates deserves endless hosannas. Her imprimatur, with its implicit directive—*take, transform; this is my brainchild*—was a gift. Because Dr. Kates grants her graduate assistants almost total control over the magazine, *SHIFT* effectively reboots itself from volume to volume; i.e., each incarnation bears the unique impress of its primary student editor. The chance to work on such an eminently adaptable publication—and to contribute something of lasting value to the world of letters—has been a profound blessing in my life. There is simply no greater gig at Middle Tennessee State University than an editorship on *SHIFT* magazine.



We have prepared a place for you here in these pages to shelter your spirit. Our concluding prayer is that you will continue doing precisely what you have been doing, only now with added reverence—that is, that you will bow your head and read.

—Layne Walton

Assistant Editor

The Buddha Walked into a Bar . . .

by Carolyn Martin

Someone told him he was quoted on a sign
to the right of the cashier, to the left
of Bacardi, Hennessy, Absolut,
and lemons sliced near olive mounds
for Friday's Happy Hour.

In a moment of mindfulness, he filtered out
smoky noise and read:

Silence the angry man with love.
Silence the miser with generosity.
Silence the liar with truth.

That's a lot of silencing, he smiled
at the Yankees cap chatting with the business suit.
A Coors Light and Jim Beam froze in mid-sip
at a voice Amaretto smooth, baritone deep.

Perhaps something more concise, he said, *like . . .*

Give, even if you only have a little.

Without a thought, the suit reached for his wallet,
the fan began to pass his cap around.
Enlightenment! Buddha clapped
and ordered sparkling water for the house.

Meanwhile, down the street,
Jesus and his guitar were collecting coins
for derelicts, heretics, and outliers of every sort.

Someone strolling by reported this weird guy
in a weird yellow dress talking weird talk
at the Rising Sun Bar & Grill.

Jesus speed-dialed Muhammad,
told him Buddha was at it again.
Meet you there, the Prophet said,
and rolled up his rug.

By the time they arrived,
Buddha was lotus-positioned on a stool,
teaching the dharma of celebrating
any time with good vibes and softened hearts.
Jesus poked Muhammad in the ribs
and sighed, *If you can't beat him . . .*
Before the Prophet could reply,
the clean-shaved Christ jumped on the bar,
turning tumblers of Perrier into pink rosé,
multiplying baskets of potato chips.
Muhammad rolled his eyes.

Speak to These Bones So That They May Live

by James B. Wells

Sunday, April 2, 2017

It's my first Sunday back in our Episcopal Church in Versailles, Kentucky, after returning from my seven-week trip to Vietnam. I was there conducting archival and field research exploring what may have really happened to my father when he was killed in a CIA plane crash on September 27, 1965. The circumstances concerning the crash are still classified by the CIA.

I'm usually the designated lay reader every first Sunday of the month, so I'm reading for the first time since January. My wife and I are in our usual seats, on the inside end of a pew, located a little past halfway down on the pulpit side.

I'm eager to meet and introduce myself to our new priest, who began his ministry at Saint John's shortly after I left to go to Vietnam. All I know about him so far is what I have witnessed in the first five minutes of the service. He's young, clean-shaven with short hair, and has a portly presence.

As he reads the last words of the Collect in a warm, clear voice, I leave my seat, genuflect in the aisle, and proceed toward the altar, but I stop when I come to where I must turn to go to the lectern on the Epistle side. I glance up at the large, stained-glass window of "Christ at Heart's Door" and marvel once again as the morning light gives it a heavenly glow. I bow, turn, and take a few steps, stand behind the lectern, lower the mic about an inch, glance up at the congregation, and begin.

A reading from Ezekiel 37, verses 1 to 14.

I know to read slowly, with frequent pauses, and to enunciate each word. Members of the congregation have appreciated the way I read and have thanked me for it.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

How coincidental, I think. What are the odds I'm reading this particular piece of scripture that was put on the Episcopal Liturgical Calendar a quarter of a century ago. I think of the miraculous discovery of the classified site of my father's death, where some of his burnt remains most likely still rest. I found it this past February only because the spouse of a former National Liberation Front fighter I was interviewing, one who

still had four American bullets in him, told us she knew where it was because she was always spooked by ghosts whenever she walked near there.

*He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."
Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD."*

I feel within my body what must be an adrenaline rush, and sense my heart speeding up. I remind myself to read slowly despite what my body tells me. I think of the memorial service my siblings and I conducted at the crash site this past March, where our readings and prayers invoked our father's spirit.

*Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
"I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."*

I think of my research and writing, giving voice to my father, letting him tell the world about his life and, hopefully, his death. My voice quivers, my throat tightens, and beads of perspiration form on my forehead. I ask myself, Am I having a panic attack?

*So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.*

I feel hot. Something's not right. I'm swaying back and forth. I grab the lectern with both hands to stabilize myself. I pause my reading for a second, look up at the congregation, and attempt to read their faces, wondering if they can detect what I am experiencing. They're all staring at me. I can't tell.

*Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."
I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.
Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'"*

I feel faint. My heart is racing, trying to keep me upright as it attempts to divert more blood to my brain so I don't pass out. I think of what the Vietnamese told us: when a person passes away in an unexpected and violent death their spirit remains imprisoned in this life so that it can resolve the unanswered questions of

their passing. My father's soul, like an unburied skeleton, has been in a state of living death for the last half-century, believing his hope was gone and that he would be cut off forever from the world, and heaven.

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

"And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people."

I think of our memorial service, summoning our father from his grave, letting him know that we've come for him and can now take him home. I look down at the end of the page. One more verse to read. I'm going to make it.

"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

I feel awash with relief, and realize through the scripture reading, my research, my writing, and through God's Spirit, my father is now restored, so that he can now finish telling his story, a story about how he lived, and how he died.

I look up at the congregation, and conclude the reading: *The word of the Lord.*

The congregation responds: *Thanks be to God.*

I think, Yes, thanks be to God.

Giveth and Taketh Away

by Gerard Sarnat

In Biblical times, cedarwood
was much desired for its aroma
plus resistance to bugs or decay.

Lebanon had once been known
for such munificent forests
which have since largely disappeared.

Due south in Egypt, Mount Sinai
was where Moses is said to have
received The Ten Commandments.

Los Angeles Cedars-Sinai Hospital is the place
where my first grandchild was born;
where Father passed soon after.

Sunny Side Up

by Gerard Sarnat

Universal blood
type of stellar dawn destars
morning's firmament.

Off the Rack Koan

by Gerard Sarnat

With a heavy heart
but whole-heartedly open,
one-sized souls fit none.

Seeing

by Hugh Findlay

Heavenly thunder—
Contrite nuns grumble and don
Transparent rain scarves

Absolu-zen

by Hugh Findlay

Sweltering sermon
Mother's forehead beading sweat
Church bulletin fans

Third World Christ

by Jeff Schiff

whittled on a branch
 whacked with a machete
 in a macho whoosh

from the canopy of a *Ceiba* tree
 during coffee harvest
 at *Finca Filadelfia*

roughed bark beard
 achiote stigmata nearly pearled eyes
 set in a natural gouge

Christ on bus windows
 scooter fenders
 decals and heat transfers

peeling from concrete stanchions and lampposts
 Christ on kitschy suitcase busters
 tourist markets

full of blessed pellet-bell rattles & slit drums
 a smoky pyrography
 supporting his evangelical cause

Christ for Christ's sake on muscle tees
 strutting his unchristly stuff
 on disposable diapers and soft-sided lunch pails

Christ a legacy
 Christ an homage
 Christ a graven release

Juan Ramon Vasquez

by Kimberly Vargas Agnese

Resting on the crossbeams of a white picket fence,
a pair of eyes nests above a patch of freckles—
watching children old enough to go to school
pick tomatoes in the field across the canal.

Behind her,
European starlings plant eggs the color of Mexican bluebirds
in homes woven from borrowed palms under the eaves of her two-story house,
where she can see her mother watching TV through the window.

“Juan Ramon Vasquez, who has been convicted
of raping a child, pleaded guilty to illegal entry
after previously being deported from the U.S.”

The driver of a taco truck passes threadbare pockets of field-workers
whose fingers smell like uneaten fruit,
backs glistening like gold.

If she squints into the reflection bouncing between the shutters,
she can see two women separated by wrinkled asphalt,

one sitting on the sofa,
making the sign of the cross;
another wiping dust and sweat off the rosary
hanging between her son’s shoulders.

Prayers glistening under the San Joaquin sun
“Lord God, from you every family
in Heaven and on earth
takes its name.”

Pretend

by Matthew Watson

It started with several short screams.

From the window, I could see a gaggle of children playing around our churchyard. They often filter in from the neighborhood, seeking, I imagine, a neutral ground beyond fences and looming adults.

These four had graced our lot so often I'd started to assign them little personalities. The tallest was their leader, a lanky brunette girl whose father attended service regularly without his wife and daughter. She was trailed closely by a pair of boys who were so close in age I thought them twins until their aging mother corrected me. The smallest child was a blond boy whose parents had never attended our church, or perhaps any church at all.

The meeker brother had his back to the largest oak in the lot. His cohorts were shouting. As they encroached, he raised both arms and declared, "I am Saint Anthony!"

His shrill voice repeated the mantra while he passed his arms over first the girl, then his brother, and finally the fleeing toddler.

It was decided the children would lie down in the browning leaves and receive more miracles from Saint Anthony. They placed themselves in a very deliberate row, folding their arms over their chests like tiny pharaohs. Saint Anthony would kneel beside them, piling on leaves. He took their moribund hands and thrust them into the air where they remained, rigid. Soon, tiny murmurs grew into yelps and shouts.

In a holy act, Saint Anthony climbed onto them, churning the delicate piles with tickles and squeals. Leaves flaked into scales, dusting their hair and knitted sweaters in the shade of the oak.

A small, blond head rose above their autumn baptism. "I'm Jesus!" he declared.

"You can't be Jesus," said the girl.

"No! I'm Jesus!"

"You're The Devil," said the assertive brother.

The more the youngest protested, the more certain he became. He screamed until his plump face turned red and that assertive boy thrust out his finger at poor tomato face, bearing a look of wise resignation as if he weren't the cause of it. He passed his look between the older children, and Saint Anthony nodded that what they saw was surely The Devil.

Against his aggressors, The Devil raised his little fist—which the girl caught and used to shake him mightily.

He flailed and fled, and they chased him down.

The big kids started nipping at his heels, and this was when he spied me in the window. We made eye contact for a wild second before he whirled himself around. Saint Anthony backtracked and tumbled like The Devil was three times bigger than he was.

The Devil took chase, hollering like a demon. He drove the kids all the way back to the big oak, all the while panting and hollering.

All the kids paced like predators round the tree, skulking, eyeing each other. The tree's girth afforded them a precarious truce.

Until someone snapped a heavy twig under a heel. Everyone darted into one another. The boys started boiling pandemonium, but before I could think to intervene, the girl had the brothers by their collars.

She raised her voice over them. "We're angels now. I'm Michael, you can be Gabriel." She nodded to the troublemaker.

"You can't be Michael. You're a girl. You can be Mary."

"Mary wasn't an angel. I'm Michael." She turned to the small boy. "You can be Lucifer."

"Who's that?"

Gabriel's face twisted into a grin. "That's The Devil again."

For a moment, that young boy's face fell, fully resigning himself to this fate. But he soon squared himself up and said, "The Devil wasn't an angel!"

"Yeah, he was."

"That's stupid!"

"It's true! Go ask Father Harold!" And all their eyes turned to me.

Their voices rang across the churchyard. "Father Harold! Was The Devil an angel?"

Gabriel and Saint Anthony were climbing all over the pews, but I didn't move to stop them. Michael was seated in front of me, and The Devil was in her lap.

I wanted to tell them The Devil used to be an angel. That maybe God made a mistake when he made some angels. But I knew God didn't make mistakes and I couldn't explain that now. So I told them The Devil could be a lot of things.

"Like what?"

"Some people thought he was the snake in the garden, but some don't think so."

"Could you be The Devil?"

I pursed my lips. They leaned in close. "No," I lied. "I could never be The Devil."

The Names of Saints and Martyrs

by *Debbi Pless*

in Sunday school we chant the names
of the glorious dead
and from the pulpit extol those
martyred—murdered?
for the cause

I fall asleep with Saint Stephen's name drooling off my lips
take scissors to my doll's hair to play
Joan of Arc
(my beanie babies are the French)
Ethan's mother takes one look at the smoldering wreck
and then he doesn't come over anymore

at church we are trained:
if they kill you, stay strong
and I smile because I am sure I will

and I smile while my fingers flicker and dance across my best friend's cheek
when I am fifteen and death is no longer just a concept
because I am no Jim Elliot or Saint Stephen
(maybe Joan of Arc, though)

still, martyrs we have in abundance and I build shrines:
Matthew Shepard
Harvey Milk
one in ten gay men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four in the 1980s

you're supposed to die nobly, they say,
to look it in the face and
take it on the chin

but if I die for God or if I die for your lips on my cheek,

I will die screaming, covered in piss and shit and mud

I will not give my tormentors the decency
of my easy death

and I will be a saint

nonetheless

To the Church for Sale on the Side of Hwy 75

by Kristina Heflin

whitewashed clap-boarded
picture-postcard monument to
forgotten faith

some dust in your corners near the
cobwebs but your lawn stays
pruned and the steeple polishes
itself against the sky

i know if i should peer in your
solemn
windows i should see ghosts
of the living who fled to the two
churches across the street
lost to stiff competition of the
spiritual market

The Inadequate Disciple Attempts Yoga

by Matthew Miller

Intention

To breathe like an old teapot,
letting worried steam rise quickly
off my kettle's dented sheen.

Child's Pose

The scriptures read: "Rest in me"
—but not all knees bend deeply
and not all silence is peace.

Upward Dog

Brown-spotted banana
noses past avocados in the basket,
hopes to be peeled.

Cactus Arms

Volunteer your vulnerable heart
to lead the line. Shove it
in the back if it whines.

Right Angle

Kneeling down, wrap your arms around
the child who shakes and whimpers,
"I can't, I can't, I can't."

Lizard

Brussels sprouts soften in heat,
brown sugar simmers the bitter leaves,
a sort of healing.

Corpse

Intentions, tea leaves and torn pages,
slink to the floor. The child
rolls up his mat and walks.

Chocolate Jesus Spongebath

by Angel Warwick

Jesus is coming downstairs
with hot water for your sponge bath
and he's got these two fat archangels
to syphon the liquid off your lungs.
They laugh, floating half-a-foot off the floor
holding up these pencil-thin tubes like curly straws
pulsing with bodily fluids.
Jesus has got this LED light arrangement
that he wears all around his glossy tempered hair.
That's fine honey, could you just lift your arm?
and his breasts pillow your back,
as his sweet brown hands scrub your armpits
with a holey yellow sponge.
And when they towel you off,
they melt and soak back up
leaving you clean and empty
Like a saint

Learning to Lose

by Madeleine Gebacz

Tonight, I'm asking God why the people closest to me feel like strangers.

It's like someone is holding a wool sweater over my face. I toss and turn, kick the blankets from my body. Every time I open my eyes I am met with a photo of Mike and me from six years ago. We're standing together on a soccer field, participation trophies in tow. That's when it started. Six years ago. I can't stop staring at his static eyes, his neck, his torso, as if I'll eventually see the clue I've been missing all this time. Ten years old.

Tomorrow is the first day of the trial. Mom has told me over and over again I don't have to go—no, I shouldn't go.

I'm going.

I get out of bed and pull the curtains from my window, open it, and let the midnight air release the grip on my neck. I can't sit with this feeling alone tomorrow. I have to be there. I have to look everyone in the eye no matter how much it feels like someone's slicing me open and pulling my guts out. Nothing can hurt more than this.

“Why is Uncle John still living here?”

The plate in Mom's hand fell to the bottom of the sink with a clank. Still and wide-eyed, Mom looked as if a spider had just scurried along her line of sight. She pulled her hands out of the water and dried them, then reached her arm out to cup my cheek.

I swatted it away. *Don't touch me*, I wanted to yell. I don't want anyone to put a hand on me.

I pressed my palm against my pant pocket and felt the lump that had been resting against my thigh for weeks. When he first gave me the rosary, it felt like a good luck charm. Now it felt like a gum wrapper, or a dirty tissue.

“He has nowhere else to go. He is still our family.”

Family. It seemed like she stretched out every syllable, slow and articulate. I wanted to chew the word up and spit it out.

I broke my gaze and looked out the window above the sink, focusing on the black sky and woods in our backyard. Trees cast in a silver shadow, their green leaves glowing.

When I was young, Dad liked to tell me stories of him and John escaping from their father by climbing the trees in their yard. He said he could hop from branch to branch like a monkey. John wasn't as quick though. Their mother always yelled at them to get back inside once John started kicking and screaming from below.

“Don't tell him I told you, but I used to call him a sloth,” Dad snickered.

He said the view from the highest branch was something else. There were some things you just couldn't see from the ground, like birds singing on rooftops, or the entire stretch of a rainbow after a storm. And at night the stars seemed a little more reachable. When they fell, Dad was ready to catch them.

"Those little things created a new world I thought only I could see. A world much better than the one waiting for me on the ground."

Mom put her hands back in the water and began to scrub.

"Dad's dead," I said.

She winced, just for a moment. She's always been so good at pretending she has it all together. I hate it. I wait for the day when she gets frustrated enough to throw one of the plates she's washing across the room. Or brave enough to shed a tear in front of me. I'm not a kid anymore. She doesn't have to protect me from anything.

"Don't make this about him," she said. "This has nothing to do with him."

I don't know. With Dad gone, Uncle John is just John. He doesn't have to be part of my family anymore.

John describes finding his faith the way someone who dies and comes back to life might. God came to him in a vivid dream—a vision of blinding white and chaotic noise. Ocean waves, honking horns, slurred voices. Then He appeared before him, blurry and distorted. A booming voice echoed in the empty space, telling him he had to choose.

John's face gets tense and his eyes get watery. "I chose God," he says, "and he saved me."

I used to ask him to describe God to me. I wanted to know what he looked like. What he sounded like. John always shook his head and said, "His image doesn't matter. It's his actions that will change you."

I have a vague memory from years ago, after mass had ended. I was searching through the crowd for Mike. No one knew where he was.

I wound up back in the sanctuary. The altar was decorated with gold runners and white cloths. Pink and yellow flowers hung from ribbons. The light emanating from the stained-glass windows covered the empty pews in shades of red, green, and blue.

I turned my head and saw them standing in front of the votive candles, small flames flickering from the glass cups. John had a hand on Mike's back, and Mike was clutching a long wooden match. With his other hand, John guided Mike in a smooth motion. Together they lit the flame.

I watched Mike blow out the match, a small stream of smoke curling toward the ceiling. Then John led him through a door beside the altar and shut it behind them.

I've replayed it for what feels like thousands of times now, racking my brain to find smaller details. I think the real reason John refused to describe God to me was because he never actually saw him. The whole story was a giant lie he created. A cover-up he could hide behind.

Mike hasn't been to church in weeks. I told Mom I wanted to stop going too, and she scoffed at me. "Right now we need to trust in our faith, not lose it."

I let the priest's sermon float in my ears and fade away. Instead of listening I stare at the back of everyone's heads. I count the ceiling tiles. Or I look at the windows, trace all the individually colored pieces, and marvel at how they come together to create something beautiful.

During Dad's final weeks in the hospital, we'd venture to the gift shop and pick out puzzles to put together. He always chose the most peaceful images: a meadow, a fruit basket, a cluttered bookshelf. He said the people in our lives are like puzzle pieces. Those closest to us are the pieces whose loops connect to our sockets. Everyone else might be further away, but they still help create the entire picture.

I wonder what happens to our puzzles when pieces go missing. When they're sucked up by a vacuum or have fallen under a couch. Can we still make a picture? Or are we forever incomplete?

Mike and I went to the arcade a lot that winter. He loves PAC-MAN. He fed coins into the machine as if he were playing slots at a casino. His body jerked with every corner he turned.

Eventually, when he was eaten by a ghost, he'd shake the joystick aggressively and groan, then look at me in defeat and throw his finger in the air. "Just one more game."

Gosh, I hated it. I don't know why I stuck around. I could have easily gone across the room and played another game on my own. I guess watching the funny faces he made and laughing every time he lost was worth my patience. Plus, it's not as fun playing alone.

One day, as he slid coins into the machine, I blurted, "Why don't you ever ask me about my Dad?"

He put the last coin in and stood up, started shuffling through the menu. "I don't know. Do you want me to?"

The little song started. *Ready!* was illuminated on the screen. I watched him zigzag through the game board, his brow scrunched and eyes in a tight line of focus.

No, I didn't. I guess I only asked because he was the only person not giving me puppy-dog eyes every time I saw him. He wasn't constantly putting his hand on my shoulder in sympathy, telling me he was sorry. I liked being with Mike because with him, I could forget Dad was dying.

I miss watching him play PAC-MAN. Really, I do. I haven't been able to call him since he told me. Sometimes I reach for the phone and let my hand hover for a moment, but I always pull back. I don't know what to say. At first, I thought I should do what he did for me and pretend everything is normal. The thing is, everything was normal for Mike when Dad was in the hospital. At least, I thought it was. Right now, nothing is normal for me.

I keep a white rose from Dad's funeral tucked away in a Bible. John gave it to me afterwards. He gave a speech at the service, a really beautiful one. Somehow, he made it through without shedding a tear. Not even a voice crack. I wanted to go up there and yell at him.

You're burying your younger brother. You're burying my dad. Don't hide your grief behind emptiness. Please feel something. Anything at all.

I wish I'd asked him how he still trusts in a God that takes people away from those they're closest to. Maybe if I knew, all of this would be a lot easier. If I asked John now, I'm not sure he'd be able to come up with an answer for me.

I pull the Bible from the shelf and open to the page where the rose lies. Now it's more of a brown color, crisp and fragile. I try not to look at it. Sometimes when I do, I find another petal has fallen from the rest. I worry if I look at it too much it might completely disappear.

At his bedside, Dad wanted to tell me everything about his life. He spoke slowly and gently, but there was an eagerness in his voice. Something like, these are the things you must know, and these are the things you cannot forget. "No secrets. This is how it went."

Growing up, his house smelled like beer and disinfectant. Rubbing things down with bleach was how their mother liked to pretend everything was okay. When he and John were old enough to understand what made their dad different from the rest, they started fighting. Not always with each other, and not always at home. It was at school, or the park, or the diner everyone went to on Friday nights. It was with anyone brave enough to throw a slur in their direction or look at them the wrong way at the wrong time.

"We were pretty hopeless kids, you know?" Dad said.

He was so brittle as he spoke. My dad was supposed to be the most indestructible person in my life, and suddenly I was looking at him as if he were glass. It really didn't matter how dreadful the stories he was telling me were. He could have been recounting the happiest days of his life, and I'd still have wanted to fall over and sob into his lap.

"One afternoon, right before graduation, I found a rope in your uncle's bedroom."

He looked at me with the slightest frown, his voice flat. "It took me a minute to figure it out. Then I looked out the window and imagined him swaying from the trees we used to climb."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and squeezed his hand. "Did you get rid of it?"

Dad shook his head and fixed his gaze on the concrete wall. "I yelled at him. I shook the rope in his face and said, 'Death is the easiest way to lose.'"

A few days after the funeral, John tiptoed into my bedroom late at night. He approached my bedside and kneeled before me. In the darkness I made out his eyes, heavy and bloodshot. He placed his large, rough palm atop my head and whispered a prayer: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you*. When he finished, we said amen in unison.

"I promise I will always be here. I promise," John said.

The air in my lungs stood still. When I shut my eyes, I could hear Dad's story again. I envisioned him hanging from the tree.

He took his most cherished rosary from his pocket. Matte black beads intertwined in a gold chain. The image of Jesus on the cross dangling at the bottom, glimmering in the hint of moonlight peeking in my window. He wanted me to have it.

It fell into my hands like water. I folded my fingers around it softly. I wanted to tell him Dad had told me everything. I wanted to make John promise he would never try to do anything like that again. His piece was stretching out to fill the blank space in my puzzle now, and I could not lose him too. But Dad's words had taken on a new meaning after he passed, because to me, there is no easy way to lose. It hurts the same no matter which way someone goes.

John rose from my bed without another word and left the room.

Mike and I started cheating on our physics tests together. I guess school became less of a priority. Both of us had other things on our minds. We were pretty sly about it though. Sitting next to each other, we slid a note back and forth asking questions and giving answers. We made sure to only do it when our teacher wasn't looking, but we didn't really account for our classmates. One day, a suck-up sitting behind us decided to snitch when she turned in her test.

As we walked to the office, Mike put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Sam, no matter what kind of shit we go through, we'll always go through it together."

The weight of his arm on my shoulder felt like a shield. I thought maybe I was the sword. Together we made up something that was invincible to the rest of the world. But without each other, it was impossible to fight back.

We stopped in front of the office door. I turned to look at his goofy smile and grayish eyes. "I don't know how I could have made it through the past few months without you, Mike. I mean it."

He put his hand around his neck and pretended to gag, then smiled. "C'mon, let's get this detention sentence over with."

When Mike told me, he was curled up on the carpet of his bedroom, tears gushing from his eyes. I stood paralyzed, as if I had been struck by a bullet, his words static in my mind. I looked around his room and noticed all these things that had seemed invisible before—a ratty old teddy bear, a deck of red playing cards, a participation trophy identical to mine. It couldn't be Uncle John. He had to be mistaken.

It makes me nauseated thinking about it. I head downstairs to get a glass of water and notice a soft light emanating from the living room. I peer my head around the corner and see Mom flipping through a photo album. She lifts her gaze from the book and smiles sweetly. "Hey," she says, patting the space next to her on the couch.

"You can't sleep either?" I ask as I sit down and nuzzle my head into the space between her neck and shoulder. Her finger starts pointing to all the memories of our past. Beach vacations, first days of school. Mom and Dad laughing at a restaurant after they met. Five-year-old me, legs dangling from Dad's shoulders, ice cream dripping from my chin.

Then she turns the page, and a photo from my first communion looks back at us. All I remember from that day was the wine being sour and the bread tasting like air. My first suit feeling itchy and uncomfortable. The tie tight around my neck. In the photo, John is standing in the middle, and Mike and I are at his sides.

“Sorry, I forgot this was in here,” Mom murmurs.

I start to turn the page, but she stops me. She pulls the photo from its cellophane sleeve and pinches it between her fingers. I watch as she begins to tear it into three pieces, dividing us individually. Jagged white edges framing our faces.

Mom takes John and folds him up as if she is going back in time and removing him from our memory. Then she holds Mike and me in each hand, brings her arms together to connect the broken pieces, and slides it back into the album.

They don’t fit together perfectly, but the picture looks much better with us standing next to each other. I pull my head away and look at Mom, her eyes glassy and strained. I know it might sound terrible, but I’m glad Dad isn’t here for this. When he was sick, I thought there was nothing worse he could go through. But now I think about how it always feels like the sky is falling and the ground is shaking. How beautiful things like the sun and stars, flowers and sea all seem so different now. An illusion, a false promise. Things that exist to try and distract from all the evil in the world.

This is the worst thing he could have been forced to endure, and I’m glad he won’t have to.

I pull the rosary from my pocket and roll the beads between my fingers. What once felt like water now feels like stone. I think back to when I first saw John after Mike confessed. I walked inside the house and paused in the doorway. He was rummaging through the fridge, picking at everything little by little, like always.

He shut the door, saw me, and said hello. I think he might have smiled too, but I’m not sure. In that moment, everything about him seemed distorted, like the room had flooded and we were drowning in water.

I wanted to say so many things. All these questions that had impossible answers. My hands were clenched into fists; my mouth was dry. Maybe it was the look on my face or the way I was standing, but he didn’t even have to ask what was wrong. He just knew.

“Sam, I—”

It took every last bit of strength in me. The last drops of momentum I had before being completely drained. With tears running down my cheeks, hot and burning, I shuddered.

“You were supposed to be like my father.”

My fingers clench, and I pull my arms apart. With a snap, the rosary splits in half. Black beads fall to the floor and roll in every direction. Quickly, Mom pulls me into an embrace, and together we do what I have been waiting for all this time. We cry for all these terrible things. For all the lies, the betrayal, the people we were forced to say goodbye to. For all the times we’ve had to pretend like everything is fine.

Nothing is fine, and we are finally accepting it.

I go back to my bedroom, pull the phone off the hook, and dial Mike’s number. It rings in long drones. I don’t expect an answer. Not this late. Not the night before. When the voicemail beeps, I say it in one long, exasperated breath.

“I’m sorry it’s taken so long, but I’m going to be there. I promise.”

I wake up early. There's an orange crest starting to rise from the edge of the horizon. I sit up in bed and look at the way it spreads a warm glow across the trees in the distance, the dark blue sky contrasting above. My head aches, and my eyes feel like gravity is placing all its forces upon them.

I step out into the yard, and the morning air hits me with a breeze of relief. I look from tree to tree. They seemed a lot less intimidating when I was younger. I had no fear back then, nothing to lose.

I approach one a few feet into the woods and place my hand on its rough bark. Then I grip the lowest branch and project myself upward. From there I grasp the next branch, and the next, stepping from one limb to another. Like a monkey.

I make it to a sturdy branch close to the top and position myself so my legs hang over the edge. My heart bursts in my chest and I catch my breath.

Don't look down. Don't look down.

There's nothing down there I haven't seen before anyways. Dad was right: the view from up here is something else.

I look to the sun, now midway through the sky, illuminating the neighborhood in a golden hue. I watch the birds fly past, their morning hymns echoing in the atmosphere. I look at the squirrels fidgeting and jumping from roof to roof. Then I watch the lights slowly flick on in every room of my house.

Down below, there are empty spaces and incomplete pictures. But I don't want to think about that right now, because up here is a whole other world. From up here, I can see everything.

Jesus At Thirty

by Travis Stephens

He sits sometimes in the shade
of his father's courtyard watching
cats play with leaves that dance
in fitful gusts of wind,
to birds that flicker among
the branches of the orange grove,
and to the children who play
in the street.
Sometimes Joseph sits with
him; they sit
in comfortable silence
both watchful
both still men with hands made for working.
At times he feels Joseph's regard
as palpable as a hand on his shoulder,
unsaid questions,
wondering what Jesus's child
would look like and why.
Joseph is, he knows, the most faithful
of men, though his temper is terrible
indeed, the striking asp beneath the stones.

Jesus at thirty wakes in the night
sometimes and doesn't know
where he is. His side aches.
His hands caress the simple chair
he made when young and certain.
There are places under the chair
seat where his chisel went astray. Once
he did not have the patience to do it
over, rushed to the next thing. Now
he can hold a piece of gopherwood,
turn it over and

over in his hands, feel
its buttery grain and imagine it taking
sail over waters that can never be tamed.
Thirst and hunger, he knows,
are just a physical impediment
to the sublime.
Just as donkeys doze
upright, so the most careless
heart finds its way to love,
to lose itself
and to forgive for weakness.
He rises, goes again to his father's house
to drink cool tea.
Another day.
Waiting.

With Depraved Indifference

by John C. Mannone

The prisoner. Remanded without bail

to the dungeon cell: damp, stench
with urine, rank with rodents and
morning roaches. They ushered him,

ensanguined, fettered. Chains
clanking the stone steps
staining red the marble court.

His face, unflinched as flint, sparked
a litany of charges chiseled in tablets
with hammer and nails.

Silence gripped his throat.

The judge washed his hands
of him. In the swelter of heat

clouds conjured over the scaffold,
shadowed the church on the hill.

And the crowd jeered
with depraved indifference¹

Crucify him!

Crucify him!

¹ “With depraved indifference” is a legal term: [“To constitute **depraved indifference**, the defendant’s conduct must be so wanton, so deficient in a moral sense of concern, so lacking in regard for the life or lives of others, and so blameworthy as to warrant the same criminal liability as that which the law imposes upon a person who intentionally causes a crime.” See URL below.] So the term is usually applied to a criminal whose offence is heinous and made without conscience. And one who is attached with “depraved indifference” will receive the maximum penalty. For murder in states with the death penalty, the judge should order execution. So here, it is not the prisoner who is being charged, but the crowd who jeers with no moral conscience to crucify Him.
<https://definitions.uslegal.com/d/depraved-indifference/>

n(un)no(one)'s story

by R. C. deWinter

I'd like to put on a floozy dress
and tacky high heels
get rip-roaring drunk
paint the town red
that's not happening
can't get this habit off

nope
i lie here
mesmerized by moonlight
strangling in this wimple
belt of beads tattooing my flesh
with declivities of guilt

it's been years
since my last peccata mortalia
but the plainsong chant of accusing voices
plays an endless loop of indictment
yourfaultyourfaultyourfaultyourfault
youidityoudidityoudidityoudidity

i do not know of what i am accused
how can i say
forgive me father for i have sinned
how can i plead
without the memory
of my transgression

Freeze Tag

by Michael Jasper

Her father told her death is cold, but cold saved her once, by killing her, or at least slowing her down enough that she should have died. When she was four or five, she fell through the frail sunny ice on Savoy Pond. She fell in running and at an angle, breaking a rib on her left side. She remembers the tilting blue sky, the strange scary buckling of the ice. She remembers its sudden silver veins, then a cymbal-cold crash of water. She came up face-first, a little to the right of the hole. She still remembers the taste of the ice and the distant scratching thunder of the kids skating where the ice was safe.

But she remembers the cold above everything else.

They found her twenty minutes later, her blood nearly frozen. In the village newspaper they're pulling her by her armpits through the brittle liquid sky. A man with a beard is standing near where the picture ends. He's holding an ax with the blade up on his shoulder. Another man in black glasses is between the man with the beard and the edge of the picture. A thin arm is reaching from outside the picture and holding the man's belt. Smudged black-and-white children, all older than her, are standing ankle-broken on their skates, mugging at the camera and wondering about all the fuss. She told her father later that all she'd wanted when she hit the water was to close her eyes. She'd gritted her eyes like teeth. She told him that, but he said it was impossible. She looks again at the picture. The newspaper is fifteen years yellow, but there she is, her face black and her eyes frozen open.

Once she asked him, "Father, was I born here?"

"You can't be born here," he had said. "You have to go somewhere else for that."

Her father was right. He always was. He taught her how to whistle, and to pull quarters out of his ear, and she still can—whistle, she meant—almost. He showed her on the pond after how thin ice bends before it breaks, and when they played freeze tag in the yard, she stayed frozen, no matter how hard he tickled her. He taught her not to melt. She did remember that. Her father showed her everything she knew, just about, and if she sometimes forgot—and she sometimes forgot—he told her it was okay—everyone forgets sometimes. She wished he was still her father.

Mendy doesn't remember much about her mother, but she does remember something, on nights like this, after her mother shot herself down cellar. Her father would take her by the hand and lead her to his bedroom upstairs. She'd be crying before they were halfway to the landing.

"Don't cry, Sweet Pea," her father would say.

He'd pick her up, put her arms around his neck, and kiss her forehead through her bangs. He'd carry her the rest of the way with her crying into his neck. He felt her tears on his skin, running down the notch between

his collarbones, and cried himself, but he kept climbing the stairs to the bedroom, where her mother's table was set up beneath the west window. The bedroom would be crowded with wide, tired sunlight. Her father would carry her to her mother's table and sit her in her mother's chair. Her mother's last diary was always open on the table. Her mother had written her poems in black ink; she'd written her day's thoughts in blue. Mendy would feel her crying in the muscle of her back, and her tears would spot the ink.

Her daddy stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. Sometimes she felt his tears tap the top of her head. He brought a new flower every day and put it into the blue bottle on the windowsill. Mendy would smell it and watch its stem slant and break in the clear water. The sun would be just touching the hills. Savoy Pond would be flat with the color of the sky, the sun swollen in its efforts to stay above the hills beyond.

Her daddy would tell her, "Red sky at night . . ."

And she would finish the line, "Sailor's delight."

Then, her, alone, "Red sky in the morning . . ."

And, "Good," he'd say, "sailor take warning."

They'd watch the sun flare sink behind the hills. The pond would go gray, then black and starry and cold. She would keep crying because she knew what he would say next. She remembered it every time.

"Get the book," he'd say, and kiss her one last time. "I'll be in the kitchen."

He'd run his crystal necklace in a burning circle around his neck, then walk slowly down the stairs. Mendy would slide over to the closet. Her father kept the Wound Book on the highest shelf.

By the time she could get it down, take it to her father's favorite chair, and meet him in the kitchen, he'd have the blender set up and the ingredients of her Kool-Aid milkshake—the milk, the vanilla ice cream, the pre-sweetened Kool-Aid powder—lined up on the counter. She'd walk in. He would turn and smile.

"Which one?" he'd ask. "We have strawberry, black cherry, or grape."

She'd remember which color she liked best.

"Strawberry," and her daddy would start waggling the packet to drive the powder down to one end.

He'd put two scoops of ice cream into the blender, then two heavy pours of milk, an egg, and half the packet of Kool-Aid powder. Their blender had six speeds. Her father would clap the lid on and push the button for the slowest speed. She'd watch the ice cream and red Kool-Aid swirl and smear along the inside curve of the blender.

Her father would holler, "Let's go," and they'd both slap the counter and dash out of the kitchen. Their game was to run through the house and slap every door, downstairs and up, then run back to the kitchen. They'd slap the counter together, and her father would switch the blender to its next highest speed. After six times through, she'd be panting and back to laughing, the blender would be roaring and smelling of sparks, and the milkshake would be high enough to float the lid off the blender. Her daddy's kiss would taste of sweat. He'd pour the milkshake into her favorite mug, a white ship's mug from when her father was in the Navy. U.S.S. SPERRY, AS-17 was written in blue letters around the mug. She'd sip the milkshake and start to cry again.

"Please don't cry," he would say to her. "You want to remember your mother, don't you?"

Her father would take her milkshake from her and lead her by the hand to his chair in the living room. He sat first, then lifted her onto his lap. She'd take her milkshake and hold it cold in both hands. Her daddy would kiss the back of her head and cover both their legs with a quilt. He'd give her one last drink before he'd gently take the blue and white mug from her and set it on the end table. He'd reach around her with both his arms, his front pressed to her back, and hand her the book: *MEDICOLEGAL INVESTIGATION OF DEATH*.

He'd kiss her again and say, "Open the book."

The kids her age called her the Dead Girl when she went back to school. The black places on her nose, cheeks, and forehead had come off, and for a time at least, until smooth pink skin grew back, she *did* look like a death's head. Even her teachers wouldn't look at her. They picked a safe spot to look at instead—a point in the air a few inches in front of her nose, or a cinderblock in the wall directly behind her. Her math teacher, Mr. Iriarte, parted her hair like an arrow down the middle whenever he called on her. But the worst was when she'd forget her lessons only minutes after she'd learned them. She couldn't help it.

Her daddy waited for her at the end of the driveway for her bus to bring her home. When the weather was warm, he heard the kids' laughter through the open windows before he saw the bus coming down Marlott. She was already standing when the bus slowed at the sight of him. The driver stepped on the brake, and the sudden stop lurched her forward, stumbling, through the laughing children. She was close enough that he could see her face. Sometimes she'd trip or wince in pain and drop her books. She'd bend, and he'd lose sight of her. When she came back up, she'd see him and run the rest of the way to the door of the bus. He'd walk to meet her. She'd jump two-footed down the bus steps one by one to the ground. She'd hold her father spasm-tight while the square laughing windows faded down the street.

He'd whisper in her ear, "That's okay. Everyone forgets sometimes."

On nights like this, she can't feel her face for the cold. She thinks now of her daddy's half-open eyes on the bed the last time she saw them. His boots were next to his bedroom door where she'd kicked them off her freezing feet. She'd worn them that morning out in the new snow. One had its ankle broken in toward the other. She walked around her father's body, straightening, waking up. She picked up the boots and lined them up under her father's bed. When she bent, she felt the cold coming off his body. His boots were now even-toed with the rest of his shoes along the stripe of old masking tape he had put on the hardwood floor. His sheets smelled of shit and vomit. Her daddy's crystal necklace, a gift from her red-haired mother, was looped on a knob of a dresser drawer. He'd never taken it off in his life, but in the end, he was choking on it, so she pulled it off him. The necklace never did get back on. She left the empty plastic pill bottle on the bedside table. She picked up his splay-legged trousers off the back of her mother's chair. Coins fell out of one of the pockets as she folded them. She picked one up, a quarter, and plunked it into the big change jar in the closet.

"I won't forget," she told the body on the bed. "I promise I won't forget."

The next day, when his body finally relaxed again, she put her father on her sled and pulled him toward the church in the village. His head dragged a trail in the snow. Breathing the cold air was like breathing a spike. The snow slopped over the tops of her daddy's boots. Her socks got soaked, then froze solid. She pulled her sled down the snow-covered sidewalk like a little girl. She was seventeen years old. The cars shooshing through the slush on the street slowed even more, their tires sliding, to watch her. She looked only at the sky. It was Saturday, but the schoolyard swings were full as she slid and struggled past. She pulled her sled and breathed back in the clouds of her own breath. The kids in the schoolyard sloshed to the fence to watch her. Her daddy's trailing hands were black with pooled stagnant blood. The kids, all younger than her, never forgot.

Dick Rozier, the village's one police officer, met her at the corner of Main and Berkshire in the village's one police car. He untied her father's body and covered it with a wool blanket from the trunk of his car. They waited for the hearse. Cars stopped at the corner stop sign and forgot to go again. Soon they were lined up down both streets, but no one got out of their car. They rolled down their windows and craned their heads into the cold. She watched windblown snow powder her father's body. His brown hair stuck stiffly out from underneath the blanket. She promised herself she wouldn't forget. The hearse pulled up, and Billy Ballawender got out. He and Dick bundled her father into the back. They gave her one last look at his eyes. She pulled her empty sled back home to wait. The kids called her names from the swings.

The first time, she opened the book near the front, but there wasn't a picture on the page where she'd opened it.

"Try again."

She would later learn and forget that some of the worst pictures were near the front. That first time she turned just one page back.

"Read the words beneath the picture," her father told her. "Sound them out."

"POST-MORTEM ARTIFACTS CAUSED BY ANTS. SEE TEXT."

"Look close. Tell me what you see."

The black-and-white picture was of a girl close to her own age. The girl had been raped, strangled, and her body dumped alongside a country road. The girl was buck-toothed in death. Her head was lying on its side in a brown-black pile of dead leaves—maple leaves, her father showed her, like the tree out back—and her long hair had been pulled away from her cheek and temple. The background of dead leaves made her skin look cold and pale. What she thought were pimples on the dead girl's face were ant bites. The ants had crawled out of the dead maple leaves to feed on her corpse.

"Don't forget," her father said.

He allowed her one swallow of her milkshake. Her tears dissolved the foam on top. She felt her father's cold teeth on her head as he kissed her.

"One more."

She went to the very back of the book. Too far back. She found the index.

“Try again.”

She stuck her thumb into the pages close to the middle of the book. She later learned to read without being told.

“INCISED WOUNDS CAUSED BY A MEAT CLEAVER.”

The old man in the picture was naked above the waist. She could see all of his ribs and the frog’s eyes of his thin shoulders. His white hair was corrugated along the top of his head. His mouth was closed, but she could see his broken molars through the slashes in his cheek.

The milkshake, warm. Her daddy’s cold-toothed kiss.

“One more. Okay, Sweet Pea?”

She flipped a half inch block of pages toward the front of the book. A color close-up of a dead, staring face jumped out as if to bite her with its eyes. She started backward and bloodied her head on her daddy’s teeth. She would never forget that picture, but she could never remember where in the book it was. The face took up the entire page. Someone’s rubber-gloved fingers were holding the eyes wide open. The whites were smeared and spotted with blood. Her reaction to that picture would never change. She cried so hard her daddy had to fight to hold her in his lap.

“Read it to me.”

“I can’t. Please.”

She was crying so hard she could barely see.

“You can do it. Just one more after this one.”

“PETIAL—”

“*Petechial*. Sound it out.”

“PETECHIAL HEM—”

“Hemorrhages.”

“PETECHIAL HEMORRHAGES IN THE EYES OF A STRANGULATION VICTIM.”

He’d take her through the Wound Book, every picture the second to the last, until, by chance, she’d come to the picture her father was looking for in the first place, even if he didn’t realize it himself.

“SUICIDAL GUNSHOT WOUND TO THE HEAD. NOTE STAR-SHAPED CONTACT WOUND AND CADAVER-ISTIC—”

“Cadaveric.”

“CADAVERIC SPASM IN THE FINGERS.”

The dead fingers still holding onto the thing that killed them.

By then her milkshake was too cold and wet and salty to drink, but she’d drink it anyway to please her father. He was crying himself, sobbing hard into the back of her neck. Her tears rattled on the cover of the book in her lap. The room got dark outside the lamplight’s reach. The cold from around them reached clear to her bones. After a time, her father turned her to face him. There was blood on his teeth. She felt the back of her head with her fingers.

“Mine, Sweet Pea,” he said. “Only mine.”

He held tight to the crystal necklace around his neck. She held tight to his neck. She felt his face slick against hers. He stood and lowered her to her feet. Her toes curled on the cold hardwood.

“Don’t forget,” he said, and she promised she wouldn’t.

He walked slow and old to his bedroom, the Wound Book under his arm. She wiped up the red splashes off the kitchen counter and ran cold water into her mug.

Her father spanked her the one time he caught her reading the Wound Book on her own. He told her he didn’t want her having nightmares. But after that first time, the Wound Book didn’t scare her. It just made her sad. She thought that the people in the pictures were people just like the people she knew: they wrote letters and wore glasses and didn’t like asparagus and were afraid of cats and their heads ached when they ate snow too fast and they were proud of themselves the first time they *didn’t* cry when they bumped their shins on the coffee table. And now they wouldn’t do those things anymore. That made her sad. That’s why she cried.

She promised she wouldn’t forget.

She still keeps her daddy’s name on the mailing label of the *Estes Independent*, even though he’s been gone for years. She studies his name—she does this every Wednesday when the fat nervous woman slides the mail into the box and spurts away down the street—she studies his name to the count of five, turns the paper facedown, counts to ten, then tries to remember what the name was. She still knows it almost every time.

Down cellar she finds a mess of old pictures in a box on the floor. The underground damp has turned the faces to glue. The pictures are stuck to each other, and to the sides and bottom of the box. They slime her fingers when she tries to peel them apart. A ring of rusty keys. An old gap-toothed comb, but there’s no hair in it, so it says nothing to her. A ribbon-tied bundle of letters, but with just the spirits of ink left on the envelopes. She opens one, and the letter inside is as soft as cotton. She recognizes her own name in the few words that are left on the frail paper, sees it like she’s seeing it through tears. She tries to refold the letter, but it oozes apart along the creases of its three folds. Another letter begins “I won’t forget the day.” She shivers, but the rest is lost. Another is written down the center of the page. The words are gone. It’s just the crushed grass where a poem once lay. A man’s heavy wedding band, the knurls still visible from the pliers her mother used to crush it and her father used to make it round again.

She finds her father’s old glasses. The frames are Navy-issue, simple black plastic with clear plastic side shields. One eye is out and rattling somewhere—she hopes—in the bottom of the box. She unfolds the glasses and wonders if they’ll remind her of the color where her daddy’s eyes used to be. She promised she wouldn’t forget. She roots around, finds the rattling lens, and holds it to one eye. Both her eyes get dim and teary right away. She buries her hands in the box. Will her daddy’s books—old, wet, and risen like yeast—show him reading in his chair? Did he move his mouth when he read? Sometimes, on nights like this, she used to lie in the back seat of the car and watch her daddy’s mouth move against the red-skyed windshield.

“I’d like to remember that.”

Her voice scares her all alone like that. She digs clear to the bottom of the box. Some old buttons in some dirt. The bottom of the box is paper-thin and is part of the floor. Nothing else. She looks up. The sun stumbles through a flaw in the old lead glass of the cellar window. She’s looking in the wrong place.

She paints her father’s picture from memory. She gets her colors and her brushes out. She has a nice clean piece of poster paper. She paints a new picture of him every Friday, all signed with her name, Mendy, on the bottom. None of them look alike, and none of them really look like the one color picture she has of her daddy with his arm around her shoulders. She does with that picture what she does with the mailing label of the *Independent*. What she does with the empty envelopes she seals and addresses to her father at home, and gives to the quiet staring man every Saturday morning in the village post office. She looks at them, counts to five, turns them over, then counts to ten. She promised herself she wouldn’t forget. Her father’s hair was brown and his eyes were blue. All her paintings have brown hair and blue eyes, but that’s all they have in common.

On Sundays she replaces the flower in the bottle on the windowsill. Then she puts on her father’s shirt and boots and walks her new painting to his grave. She tapes it to the stone there. The people in the graveyard kneel and watch her pass. One old woman cries every Sunday when she sees her. Her husband’s grave is right up next to the gravel path. She has only one eye. Some Sundays the old painting is gone when Mendy gets to the stone. Some Sundays someone has moved her daddy’s grave to a place where she can’t find it. But more often than not she finds the name she remembers, takes away the old painting, and leaves the new. She carries the old one back the way she came, through the bored and dutiful children and the faces turned away from her. At home she stacks her paintings on the table beneath the window. She has maybe a hundred of them since her daddy died, all with brown hair and blue eyes, but when she looks at them now, she can’t see anyone she knows, or anyone who knows her. In one, she got mad and just splashed different browns and blues everywhere.

She finishes this new one and washes her hands in spirits.

There’s so much she doesn’t know anymore. She doesn’t even know that. Sometimes she feels something slipping inside her like snow off a roof. She tried to hold onto what’s left the way she said she would.

Last night she turned out all the lights, put on her father’s big headphones, and turned the radio up as loud as it goes. She moved the red line all the way over to where there aren’t any numbers, there’s only space, and hoped to hear his voice out there somewhere. When she listens long enough, she hears it. The *Independent* is still out in the mailbox.

She looks out her father’s bedroom window. The clouds fan red over the sun. She uses some old notebook on the table to draw in. The edges of the pages break like eggshells when she turns them. She smells dust in the room. The blue bottle on the windowsill is full of mushy stems in thick cloudy water. Brown petals litter the table just below. Over the hills past the pond, the sky beyond the clouds is bluer than any sky or any blue she can remember. The shadows of the trees bend at the center of the ice.

Her daddy used to say, on nights like this, “Red sky at night—”

—but she doesn’t know the rest.

She puts on his boots and walks out to Savoy Pond. The boots are still full of gravel from the graveyard path. The snow on the ground makes the afternoon lighter than it really is. It makes the sunlight brighter and less tired. But walking through the snow wears out her legs. She takes tiny sliding steps, and her muscles ache. She passes the mailbox and crosses the street. Half a dozen kids are sliding on cardboard down the slope toward the water. They freeze and stare when they see her. One boy is cradling a snowman's head in his arms. He stops making clouds with his breath until she is gone.

Her father used to say—I WON'T FORGET—to say—to say—"Red sky at night—"
—tries—no—

She steps onto the fishing pier, and the ice around the first pair of legs cracks with the weight of her footsteps. She stops and looks down, at the dock's reflection, which seems broken in half on the windshield-colored water. Bare sand behind her eyes. The scar over her left eyebrow in real life is now over her right.

In school she knew a girl. The girl had red hair—she remembers this because she always wanted her red hair—and swung over the top bar of the swing set at school. She remembers the girl as just a blur after that. To slow her down she tried it herself a year ago, too old and heavy, but pulling for the sky, all shins and forearms, one night when the schoolyard was empty except for the moonlight on the snow. She went up in an arc, but the chain buckled, and she splashed down hard and red, her forehead against the bar. Knocked the coins out of her pockets. That girl must have had some magic she's forgotten. Wasn't it her that told her, "Red sky in the evening . . . red sky . . .?"

She goes back to exchanging looks with herself. She pulls her father's shoes off her feet and lies crosswise on the pier. She stretches down and stirs the water to make a broken dish-sized hole in the ice. Her tongue goes numb and she blinks hard when she tastes her fingers. She digs a pebble out of the snow and gravel in her shoe. She drops it and breaks her face into a dozen dancing faces. It floats back together every time, although she's waiting for a time when it won't, when she won't make it all the way back. She drops another. Another.

Moving as if dead and pulled on a string, a slow-blooded fish stops where her heart paints the surface of the pond. The fish hangs there, gray and monotonous, as calm and quiet as steel. Her bare feet burn, then go numb. She watches the heartbeat in the fish's slow gills. She plops a pebble through herself and onto the fish. The string is pulled. They all tremble once, all at once, and the fish is pulled sluggishly away. Her alone. She still tastes the cold at the base of her teeth.

"I won't forget. I promised I wouldn't forget."

The kids are playing freeze tag on the skittish ice of early March. One girl is it. Her skates kick up little breaths of ice when she turns. Some of them stand frozen, their faces red. Others scatter like moths in front of the girl who's it. The ones still moving weave sharp angles and figure eights in the ice. The heaps of snow swept to the bank of the pond turn dull gray as the sun falls. The frozen children tremble and bite their lips. It's an effort to stand on skates for so long in those positions. She wonders if they know what would happen if they melted—if they lost their balance, maybe, and fell—if they, or their world anyway, would melt away, running, like hers did. The dead patches of her face ache in the cold. Or do they just stand frozen and not

think? One boy wobbles, ankle-bent on black skates, but nothing happens. She drops two tears that make parentheses out of her eyes on the water.

All she has is her name, and all she knows is that his hair was brown and his eyes were blue.

The sun is low and dim. The sky is turning the color of space above the clouds. The cold sunlight catches the buckle of the ice in the middle of the pond. She wants to play. She puts her boots back on and jumps off the end of the pier to ask them. The ice booms beneath her feet. The kids take one look at the Dead Girl—she's so much older than they are, and in her father's boots so much taller, that's the reason, she thinks—and the kids melt, statues crying to life. They scream and skate away from her as fast as they can toward the bending center of the pond. She's left alone, standing in foot-shaped depressions in the ice. The cold earth screams and shifts suddenly beneath her feet. She loses her balance, stumbles, and falls.

She stands up and waits in her depressions for the kids to come back and play. The sky is all dark, except for three red lines on the horizon where the last of the sun has cat-scratched through. She says to herself, still waiting, "Red sky at night . . . red sky at night . . ." over and over, until the sky darkens for good.

Carving on the Pews

by Forrest Rapier

I.

Hurricane Matthew flooded his rose garden,
Split Spanish oak roots & left a mess of strays
Hounding screen doors for feed—chickens
Cluck off Macduff dollarweed. Radio Pop
Sidemouths his bottlenose dolphin-talk up
To Lil' Champ to scrounge change for a pack
Of Winstons, sunflower seeds & kibble
For a litter nursing under the lattice.
Corona daybreaks red seas rising—Mark
Has that marsh iris like a heron's beak
Threading stitches in the pawpaw.
Mark'd strum rowboat music on his
Fender Guitar, put his baby boy on the fish scale,
Weigh him right there so the world can see.

II.

In the schoolroom slide-projector half-dark,
Acne-scarred jerks tried to lift Danyelle's skirt
When she lit late through History's door
Like August hibiscus or Caravaggio's blue
Shawls painted around the bone-thin
Shoulders of insane Saints.
Luke muttered weird curse-words
Loud-soft behind her ear, twisted
Her ombre hair around the chewed-end
Of his blunt No. 2 & snapped his pencil
In half. Was Jesus one of the first omniscient
Boys born fatherless in a hut under a straw
Roof? Danyelle, don't spark
The hammer beneath your jaw.
Ward; her last name means 'guard'—
Keep roaring in that den.

Tapestry for the Falconers
after Stravinsky, "Apollo," c. 1928
by Forrest Rapier

Lyre-strummer, strike Spring's lilac strings
Out of a blazon-freezing season of sleet wings.
Windmill your forearms & wild the new buds
From Earth's upside-down beyond the dead
Sprigs. Once-hidden snowmelt-buried spearpoints
Glint in a blue-hour riverbed where three bathers
Dip beneath, lose their breath. Redwoods begin
Another ring amid the yawping geese flocks
Tracing back to ponds in Canada—each movement's
Inherited, inherent behavior. Pre-ordained buffalo
Rumble their thunder-hearts toward crouching archers
Painted with mud on a hill's underside. Music-maker,
Thread every thirsty patch of grass with Indian
Paintbrush & wildfire before limitless light bends

Around your world—uncontained brush fires
Blaze the deadwood-treed places. Rhyme-keeper,
Who are these turnabout triplets you've created?
Songless dancers, we want your whirlpool-calmness
Behind our brains like the Mississippi burial mounds
Positioned beneath Venus's shadow on the first warm
Day. Undercurrents will rival the clockwork-oceanic
Tidal sway, germinating seeds will surge through immovable
Earth, mile-wide swarms will change course if we speak
The correct lyrical-cadence on a clear evening—all
Living things attempt to start over. Raise the wavy
Curtain & we may witness the weightless guardians
Who walk among us—raise the million-eared maze
Where we all go to wander & find someone in a mask.

How far will we wander to find someone we want?
Young waverers wear masks, make themselves statues,
Plug their ears with whatever new wax drops in from L.A.
The sluttish public has always relished stoning
Ruthless fools whose minds are poisoned. Outcasts
Exiled on islands stare into smolders, whisper
The geometric configurations for their flying machine.
When the acid rain begins to fall, please direct me
Toward your safehouse—we all practice panic room
Ballet & cyclical movements towards rebirth.
Renewable existence with a name no one knows,
How many world-ender storms do you plan to imagine?
Would you ever create this again, another time, only different?
If golden eagles in Mongolia can spot a foxtail half a mile
In the wasteland distance—I know you heard this.

Primordial Soup

by Forrest Rapier

Every night I dug a grave, followed Polaris,
Speechless & wary through an all-knowing
Wood. The moss-whiskered Oaks hummed,
Roots engorged with sweetwater. Entire blazing
Days slipped past the fingertip-counting method
I had perfected. Sweat fell off my ribcage
Like springtide rain on the corn—every night I dug
Myself out from the dirt, followed stars Northward
As God's heartbeat thumped in the forest, pulsed in hidden
Creekwater murk where I drank enough to drown a draft horse.
Speechless, dark all-knowing North nights led me through
Thorns—my blood fell soft as warm rain on the cornfields.
Every night was guesswork, directionless wandering under Polaris
Singing for nobody or God. Entire galaxies burned out
While I dug a grave to hide my body from the horsemen
Hunting after my muddy feet—Noah hammered
Gopherwood boards without much light.
Ignoring an entire town's doubt, he built
A floating safehouse for every voiceless
Beast. Humanity is obsessed with creating
Impossible structures, arranging stained glass
Against the Eastern horizon, proving that Earth is both
Womb & tomb for uncountable seed, innumerable
Bodies—Jean-Marc Fournier ran inside the smoking
Doors of Notre Dame to save the Crown of Thorns
From turning ash when the Gothic cathedral caught fire
Six days before Easter. My first night back in Florida,
I whisked a roux dark brown, mixed in the holy trinity,
A touch more flour & let it simmer while my brother
Finger-picked his acoustic guitar beyond the patio,
Beneath a jasmine-swallowed gazebo. The celery,
Carrots & onion turned translucent, released
That intoxicating primal scent like a boar's head

Endlessly squealing silence above the lightless
Dive bar's pockmarked dartboard bullseye
A few hours before the bayou preacher clears his throat,
Wavering at the too-bright pulpit. Whatever Cajun
Magic works her invisible power inside this gumbo pot,
I love her Creole infinitude & stack the outdoor pit logs
Pyramidal. Let the ghost peppers give you a few hot tears
Because food is religion & flavor is spirit—my father
Whisks the roux while a blue flame lives
Reflected in his round eyeglasses. To me,
He is wilding up a primordial soup
Until it is the perfect color.

Classical Tongues (1938)

by *William Watkins*

If there was one thing that Curtis Chastain disliked more than hoeing, it had to be Latin. At least with hoeing the benefits were apparent. Fewer weeds, he had learned, meant a larger crop yield. A good crop could be sold at market for much-needed currency. An abundant harvest also meant plenty of canned vegetables to last through the winter months.

Latin was a different story. It was a dead language only used, or so he had been told, in the worship services of the Papists. Nonetheless, Hampton Falls required all students in grades seven and above to pass at least one unit of Latin. This was part of the school board's effort to promote the classics and an educated yeomanry in the Jeffersonian tradition.

For over twenty years, the youth of the Chauga Valley had learned Latin from Wilma Barron. Being a spinster, Miss Barron was able to pour her full energies into educating the willing, and frequently unwilling, children from the various farmsteads. She had heard every conceivable plea as to why a child should be exempted from her class. Hence, Curtis's protestations were familiar and earned Curtis a swift rebuke.

"Mister Chastain, the fundamental pillar of a sound education is Latin grammar. I tell you this not because Latin is a hoary language with roots in antiquity, but because even a basic knowledge of this language will reduce the labor and pain of learning almost any other subject. It fosters precision and discipline in thinking—both qualities in which you could use much improvement."

Unable to answer Miss Barron and figuring that an audience with the school board would be unlikely, Curtis muddled through the conjugation of verbs and the memorization of vocabulary words. He struggled mightily at first. This was more from an aversion to doing something he resented than from the difficulty of the work. Even as he began to get the knack of the language, Curtis still complained. Ever since the upheaval of the previous year, his aspiration was to quit school as soon as his mother would let him and find a job. He had just turned thirteen. Surely that would be soon. He planned to travel to a city far away from the Chauga Valley. He would earn money, perhaps in a factory, and would be able to help his mother financially so she could have her own home once again and leave the poor farm. Latin, it seemed to him, would not further his endeavor.

Buck Marcengill, the superintendent of the Hampton Falls poor farm, tried to encourage Curtis with his studies and serve as a father figure to the boy and other children at the farm. Curtis's father, a master cobbler in town, had died suddenly in February 1937. Avery Chastain had made or repaired the shoes of almost everyone in Hampton Falls. Living in town had been a badge of honor for Curtis and gave him a false sense of superiority. Hampton Falls just barely qualified for the moniker of township, but it did have a train station, Burchfield's Grocery, a hardware store, and a few other businesses. From the upstairs window of his father's building, Curtis had spent hours watching the goings-on at the train station and dreaming about the distant places seen by the train and its passengers.

All that changed in February 1937 when his father took to his bed with a fever. Within one week he was gone. Curtis was twelve at the time and had been less than diligent in learning the cobbling trade. His parents had indulged him and rarely scolded him for slothfulness. When he should have been downstairs in the shop helping and learning, Curtis was more often than not in the upstairs window surveying the streets. With the Depression, his youth, and lack of skills, there was no way he and his mother could keep the shop. The bank foreclosed on the Chastains' building and, because they had no kin in the state, the poor farm was the only option.

As with Latin, Curtis at first resisted farm labor. Undeniably, the boy had a lazy streak. He had several confrontations with Buck until the two finally came to an understanding after Curtis took a swing at him in the barn and Buck administered an old-fashioned whipping that somewhat cured the boy of his brazenness. Although Curtis would not say it aloud, he had come to respect the Marcengills and was amazed how they were able to feed the farm's two dozen or so residents. Buck's encouragement to take education seriously, on some days at least, made an impression on Curtis.

Curtis's assigned semester project for Miss Barron's class was the recitation of a portion of a speech from Cicero. "Mister Chastain, anyone with a modicum of education should be familiar with Tully's work. I'm not asking you to memorize the entire speech," Miss Barron explained, "but a mere paragraph. Now stop bellyaching and persevere!"

When he voiced his complaints about the assignment, Curtis received even less sympathy at the poor farm. Gladys Dixon, a petite but work-hardened woman, immediately sat him down and delivered a sermon on the value of laboring through adversity. "The Good Book tells us that we should exult in all tribulation. These momentary and passing afflictions breed perseverance, character, and hope. Be thankful for the opportunity to learn and use this little trial for God's glory."

Although Curtis failed to see what glory God would receive by him learning a speech given by a pagan lawyer, he thanked Mrs. Dixon and fled her presence. He climbed the steps to the room he shared with his mother in the main house. He told her and Mrs. Marcengill that he needed to practice the oration in front of the mirror. This got him out of some afternoon chores, secured a bit of privacy, and permitted him to slip off into the realm of imagination, where Curtis marveled at distant city skyscrapers that glistening in the afternoon sun. He watched motor cars speed through the busy streets. He noticed that a hum hung in the air from the sounds of various engines, both large and small. Looking into the sky, he could see vapor trails from airplanes whisking passengers to exotic locales.

In the city streets of his imagination, Curtis was no lanky boy with a disheveled blond mop. He was full-grown, sported a chiseled physique, and his hair was cut short and slicked back like the movie stars. No one bumped or jostled him as he navigated the city's sidewalks. The people parted and made way for the dashing figure to pass.

At his job in the city, Curtis operated a gigantic milling machine that cut and shaped rare metals used for rockets, like the kind he heard described on the Buck Rogers radio program. Curtis took extra care in guiding

the sheets of metal through the machine to make sure that the hulls of the rocket ships would retain their structural integrity. He knew the astronauts were counting on him.

With the constant activity at the main house, it did not take long for someone to discover that Curtis was not studying but instead lost in a daydream. While searching for her broom, Mrs. Marcengill found Curtis reclining on the bed with no hope of convincing her that he was meditating on the words of Cicero. He knew the drill. She marched him downstairs, equipped him with the loathsome hoe, and directed him to the garden patch.

The hoe's wooden handle was familiar to Curtis and smooth from the grip of many hands over the years. The metal head, in the shape of a half moon, showed signs of having been recently sharpened at a grinding wheel. The metal on the sharpened edges was shiny where dirt and rust had been ground away. Curtis hoped that the newly applied edge would make his task somewhat easier.

The garden behind the main house was itself a small farm about fifteen to twenty yards wide and nearly thirty-five yards long. Mrs. Marcengill shepherded him to the two long rows of okra. With a hang of the head and a sigh, he began the assault on the small weeds peeking through the soil. It being so early in the season, the okra plants weren't much taller than some of the weeds. Curtis had learned from the Marcengills that okra was a hot-weather plant and that it would not put on a growth spurt until June.

Curtis used the blade of the hoe to penetrate the soil and get under the roots of the weeds. He would then lift and hopefully dislodge the invader. Once he uprooted several of the weeds, Curtis used the edge of the hoe to chop the weeds into pieces.

The very nature of hoeing perturbed Curtis. The work was too transitory. Within a few days, a row cleared of all signs of weeds would begin to look as it had before the hoeing. The cycle vexed him. He could not understand how weeds could be chopped into pieces on one day and reappear the next day.

He was careful not to complain too much about the hoeing in front of Gladys Dixon. If he did, he would earn a sermon on the Fall. Mrs. Dixon was not afraid to give a message twice. On several occasions she had explained to him that thorns and thistles were the punishment for Adam and Eve distrusting God. As a result, only by hard and monotonous labor—the sweat of a man's brow—could we cultivate and eat.

Upon reaching the end of the first row, Curtis tossed the hoe aside and walked to the well to get a drink. He pushed down on the pump's handle, retrieved the metal cup hanging on the side, and enjoyed the cool water. While leaning against the pump, he noticed a thin plume of smoke rising from the woods beyond the pasture.

Intrigued, Curtis put the cup down and started in the direction of the overwrought ascending into the atmosphere. Carefully stretching the strands of barbed wire, he slipped through the fence and started off toward the tree line. As he looked up into the sky, the smoke seemed to have dispersed inasmuch as the wind was picking up. The disappearing smoke comforted him because it meant that a forest fire was unlikely. The combustion was isolated.

Maybe one of the transient workers carelessly discarded a cigarette butt when walking back from the river. Perhaps Amos Skelton, Buck's de facto adjutant at the farm, had caught a fish and couldn't wait to get back

to cook it. More likely, Curtis thought, Amos didn't want to share his catch with anyone and was preparing it on a spit somewhere in the woods.

Attempting to maintain his course Curtis fixed his eyes on the sky just above the treetops. Not looking where he was going, he felt his boot sink into a cow patty. He cursed under his breath but continued on into the woods.

He estimated that the smoke plume couldn't have been more than 150 to 200 yards from the far edge of the pasture. He figured he would sneak up on Amos and give him a good scare. Like the Marcengills, Amos had been patient with the boy and his mother. However, when especially aggravated by Curtis's indolence, Amos did not hesitate to administer a tongue-lashing. Curtis, as the offspring of indulgent parents, was not used to such frank talk. This caused him to view Amos as something of a rival and to seize any opportunity to play a prank on him. The boy giggled at the thought of Amos jumping out of his skin and knocking the fish over into the fire.

The trees in this area were mostly hardwoods, and the forest floor was covered by thick ferns. Curtis spied several poison oak plants and did his best to avoid them. When he first came to the farm after his father's death, Curtis had no idea what poison oak looked like. After a couple of exposures, he soon became an eager student of local flora.

Curtis pressed on deeper into the woods. A gust of wind brought him a hint of food cooking. He knew he had to be close to Amos. Curtis crept along, and the smell of a campfire strengthened. Even on his tiptoes in an effort to be stealthy, he seemed to find every dry branch on the forest floor to snap with the least bit of pressure.

Just as he peeked out from behind a post oak tree, he felt a tug on the straps of his overalls where they crossed in the back. His feet lifted off the ground, and his body sailed through the air like the planes of his daydreaming. Although he was not airborne for more than two or three seconds, Curtis perceived the event in slow motion. He thought he had flown a mile—especially when feeling the jolt of the ground.

“Who the hell do you think you're sneaking up on, boy?”

It was not the voice of Amos Skelton. When Curtis opened his eyes, he saw two men standing over him. Both men wore flat hats, soiled dungarees, and blue work shirts like the local mechanic dressed in.

“It ain't neighborly to spy on somebody just having a bite to eat,” the smaller man said.

The larger man reached down and pulled Curtis to his feet. They dragged him over to the remnants of the campfire where Curtis noticed several roasted potatoes in the ashes. The larger man pushed Curtis down beside the fire.

From his position on the ground, the man looked like a giant. Curtis especially noticed the man's hands. They were covered with red clay and what appeared to be ash or soot. Curtis figured that the man could easily palm a honeydew melon and certainly could crush the skull of a teenage boy. The man exuded a pungent odor as if he had gotten too close to a polecat and taken no remedial measures to wash his clothes or body.

The smaller man stood about three yards away from the giant and looked on with his hands on his hips. His torso was round and did not match his thin legs. His face was flushed, and the tip of his nose gave off a

purplish hue. With the frown on his face, Curtis thought that he looked like an angry apple with popsicle sticks for legs.

“Get my dinner out of those embers,” the larger man commanded.

Without thinking, Curtis reached down and picked up a truly hot potato. As he bounced it from hand to hand, the men laughed.

“You best not drop that if you hope to see home tonight,” the larger man said.

The man let Curtis toss the potato back and forth a few more times before snatching it from him and placing it on a rock that served as a plate.

“So kid, what’s your name? Where you from?” the smaller man asked.

Tears welled up in Curtis’s eyes, and he just gawked at the men.

“You better tell us. We might be the last people on this side of Sheol that you’ll have the pleasure of conversing with,” the smaller man warned.

Both the larger man and Curtis gave the smaller man a puzzled look.

“Sheol is the Hebrew word for the land of the dead. Don’t tell me that y’all aren’t students of the Scriptures? One of you,” the smaller man said glaring at Curtis, “best recollect the promises of the Bible and make his peace with Jehovah. And soon, if he don’t start talking.”

“I’m . . . I’m . . . Curtis Chastain. I live over that rise at the county poor farm.”

“Over that rise, huh? Well, you poor bastards did a fine job with your potato crop this year. We helped ourselves to a few and were about to enjoy them before you got to snooping.” The smaller man paused. “Now don’t look at us all judgmental you lil son of a bitch. Things are rough down in Atlanta. Ain’t no jobs even if a man is willing to do dirty and hard work. Not that we’re acquainted with either one.”

“He’s telling the truth,” the giant interjected. “I’ve stood in line over an hour at a downtown soup kitchen only to be turned away. Times like these can test a person’s will to survive. So we headed north, crossed the state line, and seen that you farming folk was doing better than your city cousins as these tasty taters testify to.”

“Enough about this sad state of the world,” the smaller man said. “Such talk is depressing and can spoil a man’s appetite. How’s about a little entertainment? Dance a jig for us while we eat and decide what to do with you. The better your performance the better your chances are of seeing home again.”

“Mister, I never learned any dancing. Mrs. Dixon says dancing is not anything but a march to a beat played by the devil.”

“She’s a fundamentalist idiot,” the smaller man replied. “If you ever see her again, ask her why David, a man after God’s own heart, danced when they brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem.”

“Seems like the boy needs some motivation,” the larger man said as he walked around closer to the fire pit. Taking about a twelve-inch piece of bark in hand, the man used it as a trowel and scooped up several coals from the fire. Keeping his eyes locked on Curtis, he strode up to him and flashed a grin that displayed a mouthful of yellowish, jagged teeth.

“Now, if you don’t commence to entertaining us with a jig, I’m gonna pour these right down your scrawny throat.”

Terror gripped Curtis and his stomach turned. He had known fear and experienced it when he watched his father slowly die from the fever. Standing by the bedside, Curtis had felt a sense of helplessness that brought on physical pain. He had felt as if he’d swallowed a piece of broken glass that turned and twisted inside his belly. He’d not felt this way in months, but that ache returned as he looked into the faces of the hobos.

From the passing of his father, Curtis had learned the reality of death and that it can appear unexpectedly. But his youthful assumption of personal immortality had not been shaken. He understood that others would die, but only when focusing on the coals and recalling the harsh words of his captors did Curtis realize his own mortality. This epiphany horrified him. Had he told his mother that he loved her that morning? With his body trembling and panic overtaking his thoughts, Curtis began to hop from his left to his right foot. He closed his eyes and imagined Old Screwtape beating on a fiery red drum. Behind the devil, a choir of demons stood clapping their hands in unison to the beat set by their master. Each time they clapped, a puff of smoke arose. The air became hazy and unpleasant.

The two hobos, reveling in his humiliation, demanded a song.

“Belt out a tune like Helen Forrest,” the larger man roared. “Stretch them vocal cords for us or we’ll stretch you out.”

The boy’s mind raced to recall some song he had heard on the radio or in church. He tried to recollect the hymns from last Sunday’s service, but nothing materialized.

“Feed him those coals,” the smaller man instructed with a grin.

In a last ditch effort to produce some melody or sound, all Curtis could recall was his Cicero.

“*Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.*” (Not knowing what happened before you were born is to be stuck in childhood forever.)

The men shared a baffled look as Curtis continued.

“*Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur?*” (What does a person’s life amount to without the historical consciousness that weaves one’s life into the life of earlier generations?)

Now jumping up and down, Curtis repeated, “*Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.*”

“Oh Lord,” the smaller man exclaimed. “The Holy Ghost done lit on him and imparted the heavenly language of the angels. He’s got the gift of tongues! It’s a sign that the Lord’s rod of discipline is sure to fall on us.”

Dropping the bark with the coals, the larger man staggered back, tripped over a log, and fell into the dying fire. He let out a howl as the remaining embers singed his hindquarters. The smaller man yanked him out of the pit, and both scampered toward the river.

Curtis stood motionless as he watched the hobos tripping over each other and hazards hidden in the undergrowth. After a minute, he came to himself and wasted no time running in the other direction. Once he

got back to the farm, he saw Buck standing in front of the barn and hastened to his side. As words came to him through the sobs, Curtis explained what had happened and how the hobos had stolen from the farm and almost did him in.

Wrapping his right arm around Curtis, Buck offered assurance. “Son, it’s okay now. I ain’t gonna let nobody feed you any coals. We’ll go in, call the sheriff, and Amos and I’ll take a look through the woods to make sure no one else is out there. It’s over. Now, let’s go find your momma and let her know everything is all right. You’ve had one heck of a day.”

After supper, Curtis did not stray too far from his mother’s side. The Marcengills relieved them of clean-up duty that night, and the boy and his mother sat on the porch rocking and taking in the cool breeze of the evening. The back-and-forth movement of his chair soothed Curtis and caused the dissipation of the shards of glass that he had earlier felt in his stomach.

Not since they lost their shop, and apartment above it in town, had Curtis felt so at home as that night after his escape from the hobos. The noise all about the house did not stop him from going to sleep early. In fact, it comforted him to know that there were so many others around. Fellow travelers who shared his poverty, who had experienced the cruelties of the world, and who could—if he would let them—empathize with his hurt. While the main house was nothing like his old apartment, in a sense it was more of a home than he had ever known.

As the spring moved into the summer heat, the Marcengills found that Curtis was slowly becoming a right reliable worker when tending to the livestock and doing odd jobs around the barn. His daydreaming sessions were fewer and his respect for his elders grew. To everyone’s amazement, Curtis earned an A from Miss Barron and even signed up for another unit of Latin to be taught in the fall. Hoeing, however, still raised his gorge and frustrated the boy to no end.

Christmas Market, La Antigua
by Jeff Schiff

Diesel of honeysuckle
leaching through pitted walls

Huddle and crouch
Abuelitas policing hog plum

Baboon cap
mounded lemon drop mangosteen

Give them their daily bread
oh volcanic compensator oh backpacked peripatetic

oh market god
three *quetzales* for a hand of breadnut

three for an arm of needled and bound pine
knowing the new year

is welcomed first through the nose
then through the soul

An excerpt from

The Support Verses

The Earliest Sayings of the Buddha.

Adapted to English blank verse (iambic pentameter).

by Christopher Carter Sanderson

Stanzas 7-10 of 26

Stanza Seven:

The Deserving.

89. Their journey is done. Sadness is behind.
Life's bonds have no power. Now they are free.
90. The thoughts of the wise are always searching,
Rising like water birds rise from the sea,
And are ever moving on, ever on.
91. How can you pin down a generous soul?
What trail do flying birds leave in the air?
The liberated are as hard to track.
92. How can you pin down these generous souls?
Sensory input does not confuse them.
They eat like birds, too: liberated souls!
93. The divinities are solipsistic,
And they are jealous of those righteous humans
Who have discipline that does not waiver
And hearts unclouded by self-obsession.
94. As solid as planets, as true as gates,
As clear and fresh as a wild woodland spring,
They are now free from reincarnation.
95. Enlightenment brings with it a deep calm,
Bestowing it on mind, speech, action,

96. Granting inner peace. Self-deception ends.
Petty attachments end. The truth begins.
The enlightened have made it to that shore.
97. The enlightened bless the place where they live,
Urban, rural, tilled earth, or wild ocean.
99. Thoughts free from sensory disturbances,
Mindful happiness blesses the forest.

Stanza Eight:
A Gazillion.

100. A gazillion useless and futile words
Mean less than one good word that gives you calm.
101. A gazillion lines of unhelpful verse
Are surpassed by one line that brings you peace.
102. One memorable maxim that grants peace
Outshines all dusty, forgotten volumes.
103. Win the battle to control your own mind,
And you've won a more important battle
Than one with a gazillion enemies.
- 104–5. Win the battle to control your own mind,
A battle not to be fought with others,
And even God cannot take that away.
106. Make one bow to an enlightened person
And you've done more good for the world than if
You'd burned a gazillion pounds of incense.
107. One bow to a wise person is better
Than a gazillion bows to a statue.
108. A year of tithes is not as good for you
As the month's help you give to a wise one.

109. Healthier, happier, prettier and
You'll live longer, too, taking good advice
From and supporting an enlightened one.
110. One day of enlightenment is worth more
Than a gazillion years of confusion.
111. One single day on the path to wisdom
Is better than a gazillion years lost.
112. One day of industry has more meaning
Than a gazillion lazy, idle years.
113. One day of sweet liberty is better
Than a gazillion years of oppression.
114. One peek beyond the grasp of death is worth more
Than a gazillion years of blindness.
115. Twenty-four hours of truth is worth more
Than a gazillion years not knowing it.

Stanza Nine:

Sin.

116. Do the right thing. Stay away from sinning.
Evil makes you frown, good keeps you grinning.
117. Everyone makes mistakes. Don't repeat them.
It is hard to break out of a deep rut;
Repeated sin makes it hard to break out.
118. When you find an action that is really good
Be happy about doing it again.
Over and over, a happy pattern.
119. A sinner is very happy at first,
Until the wages of that sin are paid
Then they get the sad rewards, and they're fucked.
120. It's the opposite for a good person;

They may be sad just after a good deed,
Then the results of it make them happy.

121. Even the smallest sin has great power;
The first minute of an hour spent outside
Helps freeze you just as much as the last one.
122. Even the smallest good has great power;
The first minute of an hour fireside
Helps warm you just as much as the last one.
123. Help yourself out: stay away from sinning,
Just as wealthy people stay on the safe roads,
Just as you would never choose to drink bleach.
124. Infection comes in through an open wound
And it will not come in through healthy skin.
Truly free of sin, sin cannot harm you.
125. Hurting innocent people with sin will
Bite you in the ass eventually.
126. A sinner can be reincarnated
To experience suffering and pain.
Reincarnated, those who did good deeds
Can be given next lives of happiness.
The truly pure? Blown out like a candle.
127. You cannot fly away, swim away, hike
Away from the consequences of sin.
128. You cannot fly away, swim away, hike
Away from the truth that you, too, will die.

Stanza Ten:
Payback.

129. No one is without terror of payback.
All humans live in the terror of Death,

- So do not kill any fellow human.
130. They care about living just like you do
And, yes, payback *is* a motherfucker,
So don't kill anyone or let them die.
131. Taking joy in hurting other people
Will hurt you instead, both now and later.
132. If, seeking joy, you do not hurt others
Also seeking joy, you will be happy.
133. Use gentle words to all those you speak to.
It will help them think of being nice, too.
Hurting words will come back to hurt you, too.
134. Tranquil thoughts, like a cracked bell, can't be rung.
Just be disinterested in conflict.
135. Like a careful cowboy on a long trail,
Death on his horse Old Age rides beside you,
Guiding you down the long trail to new life.
136. Selfish deeds are lit matches in the brush:
Soon the fire is all around, burning you.
137. Don't hurt the blameless or you will suffer
Sadness, ill health, mishaps, weakness, and
138. Neurosis, civil charges, trolling, and
139. Loss of loved ones, or money problems, and
140. Your house could perish in flames or, worse,
You could die and burn in the flames of Hell.
141. No amount of prostrating your body
Can help if your mind is undisciplined.
142. With a peaceful and unthreatening mind,
Not hurting anyone, sainted, noble—
Even if they are wearing fancy clothes!
143. Just like you don't need to beat a good steed,
Good, disciplined thoughts don't need reminders.

144. May enthusiastic embrace of the truth,
Belief, and good silent spiritual sitting
Carry you like a steed beyond sadness.
145. The farmer waters their crops, the hunter
Aims and fires, the builder cuts and nails boards;
Just so, the enlightened work with their minds.

Translator's Notes

The Support Verses is my best English translation of the title of *The Dhammapada*, as it is usually transliterated from its original language—Pali, a language older than Sanskrit. While some of the verses in it are in Pali, others have come down to us only in Sanskrit. If you're not familiar with it, *The Dhammapada* could be considered the single most ubiquitous collection of The Buddha's sayings in existence across all Buddhist traditions, as it is considered the earliest. It has, therefore, been translated into English many times over hundreds of years. I have in no way duplicated any existing translation, and given my artistic parameters, I think it impossible to have done so by accident. Those parameters are simple: my wish is to artistically transmit the truth of the verses as I have received them after meditation and contemplation of them. Therefore, they are in the vocabulary and syntax of my own idiomatic English: sometimes academic and sometimes profane, as needed.

My intention is also to honor the Buddha's suggestion in verse 102 that "one memorable maxim that grants peace outshines all dusty, forgotten volumes." To do this, I use the verse form of the most quoted plays in the English language: iambic pentameter. The Buddha's idea in verse 102 is mirrored by the philosopher Seneca who said: "I'd rather write one memorable maxim than whole volumes of forgotten philosophy." Verse 102 made it clear to me—as did Shakespeare's knowledge of Seneca which informed Shakespeare's writing—that "The Support Verses" were very much meant to be remembered and quoted. Long ago literacy was not widespread, and therefore, the catchiness of verses was a present concern for writers. And so, I hope that verses like "one field of flowers makes many bouquets; one life can do good in many fine ways" will stay in your memory. I sincerely believe it was The Buddha's intention that his sayings should.

I have taken another step here that is unique—a step that has granted the verses clarity for me, and yet I fear it may be seen as a revolutionary credo. It is not. That is, I have translated every word of the verses into English, leaving no words in transliterated Pali or Sanskrit. This is a simple exigency on my part to avoid the fetishization of foreign words by myself and other readers in English. It is too easy to think that enlightenment is a faraway, foreign thing to be only spoken of in syllables that sound exotic to our ears and that enlightenment cannot be spoken in our own tongue, or read in our own language. The authority I call on to offer this step is none less than The Buddha—whom, by the way, I call "The Awoke" in the translation—who at every instance suggests that enlightenment is nearby, usual, ordinary, and possible for anyone to attain and feel utterly familiar with. If it helps to bash any racist or colonialist fetishization that has been built up by this practice in the past, so be it. That was not my intention. And it is also not something I would renounce.

I also do not consider this translation in any way definitive or exclusive—as with any great religious text or poetic work, and "The Support Verses" is both. Reading in the original and in as many translations as possible will yield deep insight and is to be recommended. My translation/adaptation is meant to join the galaxy of translations of this great work, offering readers additional artistic insight and/or religious utility.

Conversion

by C. M. Sanderson

You're Catholic, right?
She asks.
Our skin is the same light olive brown.

She tells me she is from Albuquerque.
I hold back my reservations.
She presses against me and asks again.

Before I can respond
She tells me: We are going to Mass in the morning,
In a drunk woo-girl delivery.

Her friend states that she is a bad Catholic.
She hasn't been to Mass in days
And isn't going tomorrow.

We all laugh, and she presses against me some more.
She tells me she is a mother,
Even though it doesn't look like she's ever carried a child.

We are going to Mass in the morning,
She says again.
She pushes off and tells me:
I want to make a drink; show me how to make a drink.

I begin to show her, but she loses interest and continues to command:
We are going to Mass in the morning.
I tell her: maybe,
and she smiles and lets out a woo-girl sound of pleasure.

She tells me she won an award in high school for being brown,
something like being “The Most-Likely-to-Succeed Mexican.”

I find the information unsettling.

She presses against me, and I forget the previous feeling.

You’re Catholic, right?

I look at her and say nothing.

The thought of going to Mass tomorrow
washes over me.

until . . .

Contact.

Blast furnace of tumbling spectra diffuse skyward
horizon thoughts squeezed wormhole-thin into a spiraling umbilical escape.

Lightning bolts suture earth to sky
the first surgeon's shaky fraudulent hand revealed
Prometheus sincere
yet a fraud.

Namaste meets Nirvana,
Purgatory kisses Limbo,
As Heaven drifts toward the frozen North Star.

Neither fingerprint nor chemtrail is real
every molecule and atom an illusion.

No altar of entrails will soothe a primal fear
or satisfy the doubts of the curious.

Watson and Crick, Pierre and Marie, Harvey, Linnaeus and Galen are as absurd
as those who saw Jonah washed overboard
swallowed by a fish
and serenely spit out.

Take merciful hold of my storm-tossed carcass
seize me by my sagging armpits
and pull me roughly aboard.

Lay me on the deck facedown
breathless and gasping
to congregate with the abandoned
who refused to choose.

Only then you will let me
rise up and stare at the faceless eternal.

Eventually, after a million Apocalypses begat a billion Armageddons
comes a Ragnarök of pure reason
as prayer warriors pour out of Valhalla
their termite castle crumbling
leaping into combat against the disbelieving army.

Is this how you shall sort the living and the dead?
Will this last judgement winnow courage from wisdom
true god from false prophet?

On which plain shall you raise your banner—
and in victory or surrender?

Carbon-Based Beings

by Heather Hickox

Our connection
only science can name . . .
traces of you linger, like stardust,
on my skin

as your heavy fingertips trace
patterns of earth and sky
along soft arms and across the
fleshy plateau between
my shoulder blades

connection . . .
Every cell, nerve ending,
inch of skin, and thick strand of hair
fires
in a series of short painful synaptic bursts of longing for you

Exposed
nerves, firing,
their message sent to the void—
the Universe recipient
and I am consumed

connection . . .
I am an untilled field, ready for you
your words penetrate,
like sound tattooing flesh
you read my mind
I feel you in my brain, a whisper, a psychic touch
the weight of your fingertips anchors me to reality

Electricity flows
between us, through me and into you . . . Charged,
you arrange Jupiter's moons in the shape of an arrow
and float past touching each with the tip of your finger
as they light like a torch illuminating the way back to Earth

And I know that you are a being to worship— You are truth
that could kill religion
You smile and drift into the blackness of Space
and what else can I do but follow?

Underemployment

by Jeff Schiff

crosses and recrosses

its legs on curbs and marble benches
all over town

plays Premier league football with chipped

mosaic tiles it stumbles across
shuffling its nowhere circuit

violently whips

its keychain rosary
from hand to palm

palm to hand

rearranges quince and citrons
it is trying to sell to no one

from a cart tucked among a dozen such

swooshes imaginary flies from manikins
with a polyester cat-o'-nine-tails duster

in a store that few frequent

in a warren of stores
few know exist

nurses café au lait at dusk every day

nurses the bottle of water
that accompanies café au lait in every café

nurses a pressing thought that has not yet gelled but

blessed be the provider
most assuredly will

Fluttering in the Darkness

A One-Act Play

by K. Shawn Edgar

CHARACTERS

Felix Gillian – a middle-aged, middle child, working as a mid-level light-industrial custodian.

Alexia Staermose – thirty-six or thereabouts, works at a big-box pharmacy, reads a lot.

Young Man – twenty, tall and paper thin, with dark, sunken raccoon eyes.

Oval-shaped couple – average, no dialogue, have shopping cart.

SETTING

A big-box chain pharmacy; a darkened, light-industrial office complex restroom; and a darkened bedroom at Alexia's house. Time early autumn of 2019.

ACT I **Scene 1**

SETTING

In line at a big-box pharmacy “pick-up” counter; computer terminal, card-reader w/touch screen pad (for customers), bottle of hand sanitizer, and a sign reading, “Get Your Flu Shot Today!” are arranged on the countertop.

AT RISE

(FELIX GILLIAN waits ahead of an oval-shaped couple, who are equally balanced on either side of a shopping cart. Behind the counter, ALEXIA STAERMOSE helps a YOUNG MAN with his prescription order. Alexia is vigorously typing on the keyboard with one hand, while scanning several yellow-orange-colored bottles with the other.

Each has a printed paper sticker with drug information, dates,
and prescription numbers.)

ALEXIA

Date of birth?

YOUNG MAN

October 23, 1998. Not that I'm counting or anything.

ALEXIA

Oh, you're almost twenty-one. Got any big plans? Be safe.

YOUNG MAN

No, no. Well . . . yes, I mean. Probably just some friends and swanky pubs. Or a crawl. Hit as many as we're able.

ALEXIA

(confidentially)

I can no longer say for sure . . . but, I think my twenty-oner involved flaming Dr. Pepper and naked Twister.

(leaning in close)

Oh, and possibly a few days in jail. But keep that to yourself.

YOUNG MAN

That's going up on my blog. Definitely.

ALEXIA

Oh, good. Would you like these in a bag?

YOUNG MAN

Yes, please.

ALEXIA

(Hands him a white paper bag with the
medications inside.)

See ya soon; and have a good day.

YOUNG MAN

Thanks. You too.

(He walks away.)

ALEXIA

Next, please.

(FELIX GILLIAN hesitates for a moment,
and then approaches ALEXIA at the counter.
She smiles at him with familiarity and genuine
friendliness.)

Felix, good to see you again.

Hey, Alexia, thanks. You too.

Date of birth?

February 15, 1973.

(Typing on keyboard.)

Looks like we have four today.

Okay. Is one of them labetalol?

(Checks computer screen.)

Yes... and prednisone, clonidine, and omeprazole.

Great, good. Sounds good. I'll take 'em.

(nervously)

How's everything going with you?

(She looks more closely at him.)

Wonderfully . . . and my nursing classes are kicking my butt. But still good.

Oh, yeah. I can imagine . . . it's all that reading and memorizing . . . bone names, Latin . . .

Well, not too much of that sort yet. The books are thick, and medications are hardest to remember . . .

(beat)

Each has three names, at least. Trying to keep them straight is a blast.

It's kinda like the cats in *Logan's Run*.

(Laughing)

Oh, cute . . . but how?

You know. . . "Each of these cats has three names . . ." The old man says it during the White House scene.

ALEXIA

(uncertain)

Right. Sure. Bag?

FELIX

No, thanks; they're fine like that.

(Hesitating, and then bursting.)

Hey, we should meet up sometime. I work nearby. Get together some evening? Coffee? Yeah?

ALEXIA

Um, maybe. I mean, sure. Yeah . . . sure, we should.

(Hands Felix his medications.)

We could sometime . . . How's your Thursday? Coffee.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING:

We are in the restroom of a darkened light-industrial office complex. Three restroom stall doors (upstage) are opposite two industrial-sized, yet stylish, sinks (downstage). These are backed by the chromed metal frames of nonexistent mirrors, through which the AUDIENCE views the scene. Off to one side, a wide-open janitorial closet feels like a hell-mouth grinning. Various janitorial tools spread out from it, all gleaming with pinguidity.

AT RISE:

(FELIX GILLIAN, dressed in blue-gray coveralls, rubberized work boots, and his flushed face domed by an N95 ventilation mask, drags a mop over the floor in front of the stalls. He recites a spoken-word poem.)

FELIX

(energetically)

Wake to sleep, my life. Eat. Work. Sleep. Repeat. Feed my fine friendly cat. Brush cat. Repeat. Winter in the valley means mildew and mold spores. Repeat. Cannot breathe freely here. Nose stuffed. Repeat. Sleep in

dreams' break, or break's dream . . . 'til death awake. Prodded or beat? Beat awake. Repeat. Snore. Stop. Repeat. Breathe, can't. 'Til dreams attack. Wake!

(A loud knock SOUNDS on the main restroom door. FELIX drops the mop, a bit startled. He walks over and opens door, cautiously.)

ALEXIA

Hi. Am I early?

(beat)

Did you forget?

FELIX

Oh, crap. I'm sorry. No, didn't forget. I'm distracted and behind. Honestly, I was working on a poem too.

ALEXIA

Poem? Never thought I'd ask this . . . but may I come in . . . to your men's restroom?

FELIX

(flustered)

Sure, come in. I'll just finish up.

ALEXIA

Okay. And then coffee? I think we need coffee.

(FELIX opens the middle stall door. Inside is a slaughterhouse mess. He searches around for something, and then calls out to ALEXIA.)

FELIX

Alexia? Could you grab the large plunger next to the closet?

ALEXIA

Sure thing, Felix.

(She turns toward the janitorial closet and stops abruptly.)

Oh. My. Wow. That can't be regulation. *Antibiotics?*

FELIX

Um, what? Should be right by the door. You see it?

ALEXIA

Sure, right . . . I think.

(She grabs nearest plunger. Holds nose. And walks to stall door.)

Is this the one?

(FELIX pokes his head and shoulders out of the stall to eye the plunger and then shakes head.)

FELIX

Oh, no. Sorry. I'm gonna need the bigger one. It should be just inside the door.

(Scrunching up her face and carefully digging into the mess around the closet door.)

ALEXIA

(with relief)

I got it! I got the bigger one.

(She walks back to stall door.)

Wow, do you call this one Moby Dick?

(FELIX reaches out and takes the bigger plunger from ALEXIA.)

FELIX

That's the one. Thank you.

(beat)

And, no, I call it My Giant.

ALEXIA

(smiling)

Sure, sure. Of course you do.

(ALEXIA turns to look at herself in one of the mirrors.)

Quite the place. You work here long?

FELIX

Yeah, too long. This restroom is mostly used by the new bio-drone workers. Messy cogs.

(Attempting to inject humor.)

And they're horrible tippers too.

ALEXIA

(slightly amused)

You're funny.

(beat)

Um . . . wait, what?!

(Shocked, she looks around the room as what he said fully sets in.)

ALEXIA (Cont.)

Bio cog drones?

FELIX

Yep. MOTT'S, the multi-national company, calls them “hybrid serfs.” But they’re just drones, robots, built with artificial meat parts. Bio synthetic. And some actual biomaterials are used, so they still excrete a lot of waste fuels and lube buildup. Messy.

ALEXIA

(wide eyed)

So, that’s not human? The poop you’re trying to flush?

FELIX

Well, mostly it’s not human.

(beat)

A few of the busier execs do use this restroom too. And those guys are mostly human—er, a kind of human, anyway. They crap too, I guess.

ALEXIA

(nodding)

Everybody poops.

FELIX

(quoting)

All the people, all the time.

(And then, after an awkward silent pause.)

You know, the old man from *Logan’s Run* says it.

ALEXIA

(hedging)

Oh, right. Sure. Haven’t seen that movie for a while. Guess we’ll have to watch it together sometime.

FELIX

(FELIX emerges from the middle stall, breathing out with finality. He tosses the bigger plunger back toward the Hell Mouth closet. A loud GROAN booms from the Hell Mouth closet, as if in response.)

Shall we?

ALEXIA

We most certainly shall. Let's bounce.

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF SCENE)

ACT I
Scene 3

SETTING

We are in the darkened bedroom of ALEXIA STAERMOSE. It's sparse in décor, with a bed and a window. Some light streams in from a streetlamp, and there's the hint of neon oranges and reds from a motel sign across the street.

AT RISE

ALEXIA and FELIX are in bed, under the covers, each holding a mug of coffee. FELIX stares out through the window glass.

ALEXIA

I guess, for me, it's the tactile. Nothing's truly alive unless there's feeling. Some prefer sight, but I'm a touch person. Reach out, touch, grasp, hold, release. Re—

FELIX

—Peat. Yeah, life is tactile. You're right. It's aberrant, messy. And it should be . . . more than ambient—more than just distant surroundings.

(He props himself up more with pillows, and downs some coffee.)

Really, it holds our heaviness, our mass, aloft and keeps us animated. Life is a buoy.

ALEXIA

Yeah it feels like biology's urge is to decay and sink. But something in our brains or minds pushes back, sparks.

(An electrical surge in the motel sign, outside the window, makes the neon colors flare up for a moment. And ALEXIA downs more coffee.)

Our flesh parts are briefly energized inert materials. State of decay. It can override the activeness of life.

(More neon light surges through the window. More coffee.)

These atmospheric are thin. Can't grasp them long enough. It degrades, is degrading. Need the touch.

(FELIX stands. Walks to window. He parts the half-drawn curtains with his hands held flat, drawing them apart, as if estimating the size of a fish that got away.)

FELIX

I adore, repeat, I adore you.

(He glances toward ALEXIA.)

So, before we fall asleep, I should tell you something important.

(ALEXIA sits up and moves to the edge of the bed.)

I die again and again, each night. I fall asleep. I enter a dream state. And in a two- to three-second lifetime of dreaming, my breath stops. Just for an instant that lasts and lasts. The dream is happening around me and to me. It's watching and reacting. And I die briefly.

ALEXIA

(with urgency)

I'm here. I can wake you. Breathe with you.

FELIX

But it's an experience. In the dream my brain plays the antagonist—it sparks. It gathers its forces, enters the dream, just as my breath stops and my nostrils close . . . mouth, dry.

(More neon light flares up through the window glass.)

Right then, my brain forces characters in the dream to bunch up, and aggressively come at me. My body, helpless in bed, feels their attack.

ALEXIA

(Jumping up.)

Felix, jump with me. We'll spark together. Our bodies, momentarily aloft, will fall gently into bed.

(FELIX throws his arms around ALEXIA, and they jump back in bed. Coffee mugs topple and spill. ALEXIA roughly pulls the covers over and around them.)

ALEXIA (Cont.)

Truest forms are tactile, touching. Awake! Awake, you!

FELIX

(Mostly to himself.)

At just the needed moment, as all breath goes out of me, my brain has saved me again. Poking and pushing, the monsters of my unconscious, or my suppressed memories, force me awake, and back to life. Aloft!

(As neon lights flare up again, FELIX suddenly pokes his head out from under the covers. His facial expression denotes surprise, relief, and a sort of disappointment.)

(A DISEMBODIED VOICE, from under the covers echoes and bounces on the surging neon light.)

DISEMBODIED ALEXIA

(off)

It's a survival mechanism. It's your mind-body spear screaming, "Not yet! Not yet! Spark! Stay aloft! If only for another moment, live . . ."

FELIX

(Looks at the neon lights coming through the window glass.)

Am I here? I think I might have stumbled into the Hell Mouth janitorial closet by mistake.

DISEMBODIED ALEXIA

(off)

Awake, you! Awake!

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF ACT)
(END OF PLAY)

Path of Least Resistance

by Devon Balwit

All Elmer wants is booze and a snuggle—
certainly not to be saved. God belongs
safely in church, worshipped in song
and in the cheesy casseroles ogled
by the faithful in the potluck line. Alas,
he doesn't realize how easy it is to be counted
among the lambs. Daydream, relax your guard,
and twenty YMCA boys will clasp
your shoulder and lift you up in prayer.
Elmer's too uncertain to refuse. As much
as he loves raising hell, he fears the touch
of the pitchfork more. To be a naysayer
takes work. He'd rather coast, tippling
on the sly and winking, muscles rippling.

(after Sinclair Lewis)

Ten Thousand Difficulties

by Greg Maddigan

I am like them, a fisher of men, my faith
buoyed momentarily by bustling nets
sewn with pragmatic linen. I follow,
parceling out the loaves, waiting for my loyal moment,
my right hand seat. I am surprised
by the words of denial, centipedes' legs, skittering swiftly across my firelit lips,
chinking like silver coins in the wells of my ears:
Oh, these fissures of men.

At that first moment, though, by the foam and choppy water, I walked
away from my boat, one of the chosen, thinking
I will, he will, transubstantiate
my life.

Later, when I fell asleep in the garden, dreaming doubt—
Maybe I should have stayed home to
dance with my daughters, to
fling my son by his bony ankles into the deep waters, to
spoon my wife's naked body in the gloaming, to
gather up her garments, to
anoint her feet with oil, to
haul and mend, haul and mend.

A Pack of Camels

by Sam Matteson

I sometimes wonder about Jesus. And I wonder what people would say about him if he lived in my neighborhood. I suspect that you would find him, if you were the inquisitive sort, at Joe McGovern's Tavern on the Bayfront after he left the cabinet shop down the road. He would be eating fried flounder and drinking a beer, listening to fish stories the men who frequented Joe's liked to tell. He would look out over the water and see the bobbing lantern lights of the flounders gigging the flat fish in the shallows of Mobile Bay. He would listen to the men, who smelled of day-old sweat and too many yeasty brews, as they squinted through the blue smoke from their cigarettes. He would laugh at their jokes and look right through them. And they would look back at a man with big hands and sawdust in his hair, one who listened hard, as though he really cared what you were saying and knew whether you were speaking the truth or just bumping your gums. Either way, you would know that he loved you.

In Alabama when I was coming up, we didn't hide our religion in a broom closet. Spirituality was not so much a private issue as it is nowadays. We weren't embarrassed to say, "I'm a Baptist, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Born-again-twice-blessed-Pentecostal Brethren. Or he's a Catholic, a Jew, or a reprobate." (Chances are, too, we knew somebody who was the latter and one of the other categories at the same time.) It was because we got out more where I lived, I suppose. Out in the woods and out on the water. It is hard not to be spiritual, even if in an unorthodox way, when you walk out under the moss-hung oaks and hear the whispers on the bay breeze, the hoarse voices of long-dead dear ones and of nearly forgotten enemies, the memories of folks gone on ahead.

Everybody in Mobile was religious, it seemed to me in those days. Even—or particularly—fishermen, though frequently they didn't seem very pious. But rare was the fisherman of my acquaintance that didn't tip his bill cap to God now and again—just to be on the safe side. Too many fellows had gone out on a sunny day and not come back after the sudden storm.

But, if Jesus lived on Bayfront road there would be talk. Of that I am sure. There always is. Church people can be the meanest flock of birds in the world. Like a yard full of chickens that peck another hapless biddy to death because of a spot on her head. Dad quit the church for a while once because the deacons were pecking away at the preacher in a squabble. When he could stand it no more, my Dad embarrassed me to death: he stood up in a business meeting, leaned on his good leg, and requested that his name be struck from the church rolls. He would have no part in the fight. He had been the chairman of the deacons, too—until then. The fight was about which side of the church we would put the Hammond organ, I think. No, it wasn't really about that at all, when I think about it; that's just what people said it was about; what they talked about. It was really about who was in charge, the preacher or the board. People and chickens, just the same, it seems.

About that time, the church held a youth camp down on the bayou with a weekend of meetings, singing, games, and preaching by an itinerant youth evangelist just five years older than I was. All the girls were in love

with him and all the boys wanted to be him, even if only to have the girls love them too. He shared a cabin with me and four other boys. Since I was in charge of the sports equipment and had worn myself out trying to keep up with volleyballs, softballs, bats, and horseshoes for forty or fifty careless teenagers, I got to take a nap one afternoon during the fifth evangelistic service of the weekend. I walked into the cabin where the suitcases were laid out on the bunks. One beat-up tweed suitcase stood open. I wasn't snooping, but I saw there, stuck in the corner under a pair of socks, a pack of Camels. Cigarettes are very much against the rules at a youth camp. Smokes are an unholy vice, as everyone knew at my church, since smoking was declared a venial sin, along with drinking, rock and roll, and dancing, of course. Cigarettes on the hallowed grounds. A sacrilege! And what is more, the suitcase lay on the preacher's bunk!

I did not sleep well during my nap. I was at once horrified, disappointed, angry, betrayed, and bewildered. The nerve of that man! To preach holiness to teenagers in ponytails and T-shirts, to exhort kids in white socks and poodle skirts to purity and all the while secretly winking at his own sins! He is just like all the other menfolk who stand around on the back stoop of the church house smoking between services then go in and pass the offering plate, their breath still smelling of tobacco. As my Mom, a clandestine puffer herself, is reported to have said, "Smoking won't send you to hell, but it sure will make you smell like you are a frequent visitor." I woke up with a headache.

I waited sullenly, until my righteous indignation turned to smoldering shame. After the kids spilled out of the chapel back into the cabins, Billy, a pre-delinquent thug, sauntered into the room, shut his suitcase, and moved it from the preacher's bunk up onto his own. I heard my inward judge indict my own self-righteous, loveless heart, and I stood condemned in the dock. I was "the church people" that my young heart despised.

If Jesus lived in my neighborhood, I wonder if he would smoke Camels. It probably wouldn't matter. People would think he did. The church people would disapprove. He would smell of the smoke of Camel cigarettes because he spent too much time at the tavern loving fishermen.

The Catfish

by Heather Hickox

Captured, in grainy black and white,
backlit by afternoon sun
your last moments of life
are captured in a picture.

A picture-perfect afternoon,
blue sky, green water,
and you . . . writhing, violently
twisting and arching your body
into a shape that mirrors
the barbed hook piercing
your delicate mouth.

The Fisherman stands smiling,
We're eatin' good tonight, Jack,
his buddy remarks,
and an open-mouthed guffaw
is captured in time
at the exact moment
the shutter clicks.

His mouth, wide
enough to reveal the glint
of silver fillings on molars
mirrors your own as you
struggle against heavy oxygen
and thrash as you're lifted,
tail-held, a prize on display.

Captured, you're anchored
against the dark,
grainy cedar driftwood plank.
He's too pretty to eat,
the Fisherman declared.
So they filled you with salt and sawdust,
glazed your skin, and gave you shiny
new gold-flecked glass eyes.

You were hung in a place of pride
over the fireplace mantle
and for years watched on, witnessing,
as the Fisherman grew his family.
Until the day that family gathered
in mourning for the young
Fisherman's death.

And you were moved—along
with boxes of old flannels,
razors, two wool suits,
and a threadbare maroon bathrobe—
to a corner of the basement

where the Fisherman's daughter
would come to inhale the fading scent
of cologne lingering on soft flannel,
run her small hands across the
sharp flaking scales of your body,
and lose time peering through
gold-flecked eyes and swear
that, for a moment,
she could see you staring back.

Respite

by Monica Fields

Beyond the garden, dense fern
Made the dark forest bottomless
And would hiss when the deer
Disappeared into its green.

I dug my fingers into ribbons
Of bark a buck had rubbed, pooled
At the base of the oak. My father's
Hand lingered on my neck.

“A big buck,” he whistled,
Before lifting me to his shoulders
And parading us deep into the woods.
Deep in. Like good hunters.

Envoi

by Monica Fields

The trouble with violence? It remembers,
And like a muscle rehearsing practiced runs,
Demands some play, reproduction in dreams,
Or worse, in days, so each one is a tightrope
And the walker disposition. White shades
Of meaning between trapped and prone; poised,
Ready to tip at provocation. His DNA persisted
In more than my fingerprints.

I fell into gray futures.

My respite? That I do love despite my father,
My wife nearly slipping from this earth
By my own fists. She flickers in and out
Of my revival, leaving me to shoulder
My potential in the dove-gray holding cell,
Like when the snow fell, covering my prayer.

Sand Castles

If “Communion” Is Too Strong

by Allison Boyd Justus

May 2005

I sat slumped on the beach. I wasn't aimlessly pushing the handfuls of sand. It looked that way. I just couldn't hold onto any aim for very long. The smallest decisions—a mound here, a wall extending from its side—couldn't seem worth it, not long enough for me to pack the sand down, follow through to build on a larger intention.

Maybe someone would come. It felt vaguely fantastic any time I imagined it: meeting someone while out somewhere, far from home, and having a conversation that would change everything. We would form a friendship, a contract of healing. It might not last long, but by the time I was gone we would have started something—established a fund, say—to help other people. Then other girls, college girls who were collapsing on beaches or in cluttered rooms, would gain footing again, rise up in purposeful bloom, quote Boethius and know God.

“It's a very Zen experience,” he explained to us as he demonstrated how to paddle a kayak. Guide, how to guide a kayak. He worked the piece of plastic, balancing it in the air five or so feet above the gravel driveway. “Zen” was a code word for something essential, whatever my dad and brothers might think; my gut told me that much.

Wait—how to position the loose hand, while the tightened hand is rotating the paddle, and whether my loose hand should change position in order to grasp the paddle upon its downward return—I'd missed something. Had I missed something? So much for clear questions, open eyes, open mind. Waters closed over my head before we left the boat rental facility for the bay.

We launched into a still and salty inlet, which was shallow enough that colonies of straight, rough grasses grew near the middle. Strange birds called from the surrounding forested shore. I listened with my whole body and prayed for something to happen—something similar enough to what happened at the sculpture park.

October 2003

“May I ask what you wrote?” he asked. I inhaled at reflex, hesitating. He'd wordlessly handed me his journal and black pen when I'd asked the group, with a slight strain in my voice, if anyone had any paper and something to write with. Maybe I looked like a serious writer. These were only thoughts, though, the overflow of a swelling recognition:

we described building the sand castle as surreal we enjoyed it immensely and there was no need to talk about it—saying anything, admiring our work or selves or experience aloud, would have detracted from the profound pleasure. Like in the art museum today, noting that art is best enjoyed alone. When you're surrounded by people saying this is beautiful this is wonderful look at that red, you're inclined to agree—or disagree—rather than taking it all in and deciding for yourself. I had thought an art museum might make a good date but I have now decided that no, I think not. It would be an annoyance. To comment idly for the sake of making conversation would suspend the whole day in the shallows. THE SHALLOWS. No.

So, wander where you like. And I haven't even gotten to the sculpture park, running through the woods 'neath the low storybook canopy of trees—it would have been fun with other people, and we probably would have talked the whole time about how fun it was or that we should be getting back to the group. Not that those guys and I didn't talk today—we did some. But I learn more when I am quiet. Surreal? Could I say? No: but like the sand castle.

He had asked, and he'd asked respectfully. How couldn't I answer? We might become friends. "Running through the woods"—I hesitated—"reminded me of building a sand castle."

"Of building a sand castle?"

"Yes."

April 2003

"Surreal." We knew the word wasn't *exact*. It was the best we could do. Dana had come with Mom and Granny and me to the beach in Florida. AP tests were just a couple weeks away, and *we were missing two days of calculus*. Conscientious to a fault, I'd had to be coaxed into this small rebellion of a vacation. For five years, my best friend and I had gleefully and intricately constructed our own reality. As we reveled in our friendship and in the blessed art of *knowing*, as we called it, we frequently mystified and bewildered those around us. "Dana and Allison are in a constant state of euphoria," a boy we knew mused. ("Yes! Yes, we are! We are that.") Mom and Granny probably exercised more patience than we realized we required on that trip.

Granny knew how to vacation. She packed with a compact abundance. She brought with her a sampler box of coffee creamers. Dana and I tried them all, and kept track: hazelnut was my favorite; Dana's was french vanilla. Amaretto gave us pause. It wasn't *thrilling* like the others were, but it rewarded our attention. We savored it—barefoot and beautiful. *We are beautiful*. Dana would say things like that, and I would, too. She started it around ninth grade, telling girls they were beautiful. We needed to know. Holding onto it made it more true. She and I were self-proclaimed, defensive idealists; we loved God, music, truth, and beauty, and we savored the amaretto creamer along with the shells and the breeze and the clothes and the jewelry we'd picked out "to wear at the beach." We hadn't packed as light as Granny.

Building a sand castle was fixed securely on our agenda well before we left home.

Technically, it was my idea, but could have just as easily, perhaps simultaneously, been Dana's. We agreed often, and readily. Saturday was the sacred day. I wore a black tank top with grey cargo pants I'd cut off and

rolled up to capri length; Dana wore a loose T-shirt over her new bikini and wrapped a pink beach towel around her waist. The plastic bucket we'd found swung lightly from her open fingers as we searched, slowly but purposefully, for a sparsely populated stretch of shore.

As I'd thought forward to this weekend, the sand castle had seemed singularly important to me. The last time I'd built a sand castle on the beach was the summer just after fifth grade. I'd built it according to the standards my brother and I had developed long ago (Dad built a sandbox for us when I was six): start with a good-sized pile of sand, pack it down, then dig—not so much straight down as through—a tunnel. I didn't love *love* playing in the sand until I'd learned that when it's packed down tight enough, it will hold itself together over empty space. Images of pueblos, Roman archways, crumbling temples, and whole cities in faraway deserts, vacant, and telling of forgotten civilizations, whole worlds—these I'd seen on TV and in books. Their recreation seemed tantalizingly possible.

Dana and I lived for enchantment. At eighteen, we'd met just enough real disillusionment (in the faults of McMinnville boys, chiefly, but also in less-than-perfect scores at band competitions, and in the way our relentless dedication to the Warren County Marching Band actually hurt our precious weighted GPAs—band was a four-point class, even for first-chair players) to triumph over it, earnestly reminding one another that The One *did* exist—one intelligent, chivalrous hottie for each of us—that moral perfection was possible, and that the limits we graphed on our TI-89 calculators for AP Calculus did, in fact, reach infinity. We just *knew*—our connection was strong, our perceptions complementary.

So we would build a sand castle—a monument and celebration.

I showed her how to start: a good pile, pack it down, start digging. This was the most crucial part. I was nervous. If she didn't see that there had to be tunnels, that there had to be rooms, so that if we were small enough we could walk around inside and sit down and be cooled, as in caves—but she followed. I relaxed. With the pile of loose, newly displaced sand, we could begin another wing of the castle, hollowing out additional rooms on multiple levels, connecting tunnels at whim or out of necessity, and smoothing and sculpting the castle's outer walls as we progressed.

"Looks like modern art," the man said, hairy and shirtless, ambling by on the way to his fishing spot. We thought he was weird. We didn't know what to say, but we smiled. As he returned from the other direction that evening, he said something else about modern art. We saw that he was impressed.

The shells were Dana's idea. I'd built plenty of sand castles before, but I hadn't thought about shells. Most of my previous work had been landlocked, done in the sandbox in Tennessee. Dana was more patient and painstaking. I liked the shells, of course; I liked placing them where I felt like they should go—but her visions were intricate, and she loved them enough to make them real. She wanted to be an interior designer. She gathered so many tiny, *tiny* shells—shells and pieces of shells—and with them lined the top of a low wall in our castle's courtyard. She decided we needed a grand staircase. She built one. I'd never built a grand staircase in a sand castle before; I didn't know what to expect. I might have even doubted. But delicately—deliberately—she arranged some twenty or thirty thumb- to thumbnail-sized scallops and clams into a split

cascading staircase, winding down into the grand hall. We worked in sync, attuned to one another and to the task at hand, and the work was wholly ours.

She wrote me in an email about a year later:

There was something so incredibly special about building the magnificent castle together on the edge of the continent. Remember? We didn't even talk much; we just created together something beautiful. I felt like our "knowing" force, or whatever it may be, was stronger than I had ever really felt it. It was magnetic. And remember how you were mainly royal architect, and I mainly royal decorator? We never disagreed how it should be built, or where the shells should go. The castle, or the creation of it, brought out the beautiful inside each of us, and they worked together perfectly. Our friendship is like that. We are so different, yet together we embody something greater than we could ever achieve alone. I appreciate how you see the "big picture," the architecture, of things . . . and how I notice and imagine details that enhance its beauty.

Once we finished, we took pictures, and the surreal, slightly heady silence lifted, left us giddy. There was much to savor. "Here is the grand hall!"—"And here is where the king and queen can come out and stand, and the people gather here to listen to their speeches"—"And at night there are feasts, in this room here"—"Feasts of fresh strawberries, and Godiva, and cookie dough! And sparkling grape juice!"—"And shrimp cocktail, and raspberry sherbet, and sometimes tomato soup."—"But probably not ravioli."—"Yeah, not ravioli . . . not in the castle. Even though it is good."

"And the Elves come here—the Elves from *Lord of the Rings*!"—"Yes, yes, they do! This is where they came! This is where they came when they sailed away, at the end of the book!"—"Yes! That's what it is! Oh . . . I'm so *glad* that's what it is!"

"And after the feasting each night and the toasts over sparkling grape juice, the minstrels sing."—"Yes! And Enya comes. We invite Enya, and she sings."—"Yes, Enya! And Loreena McKennitt sometimes, too."—"I think the Elves would approve."—"We are Elven!"—"Yes, we are! And we are beautiful! And our castle is beautiful."

And once we returned, to the world of research papers and AP tests and graduation invitations: "The castle—I miss it!"—"Me too!"—"But it stands . . . it will always stand!"—"Because we *know*."—"And we will *always* know." To our relentless calculus teacher we delivered a photo entitled "Calculus on the Beach," a portrait of Dana and myself in coordinating dresses and studious expressions, posing with our calculus folders and TI-89s, pointing to a giant unit circle we had drawn in the sand. Thus we obtained forgiveness for having missed two days of class so close to time for the AP exam. We ensured the goodwill of all the friends we hadn't invited along by delivering specially selected shells to each of them, signed by us both: "To Jennifer—Love, Alli & Dana." At our graduation a month later, we searched wildly for each other as soon as our senior class was dismissed. We embraced during the final chords of "Time of Your Life," took pictures in our blue caps and gowns, and vowed to email every day once away at schools on opposite ends of the state.

April 2005

“Right now I really want to lie down on the ground, and somehow pull the grass over me like a blanket, and go to sleep underground . . . I didn’t mean for that to sound suicidal.” I didn’t want to sound suicidal. I didn’t know what might sound suicidal. “I don’t mean that I want to die. It just seems like it would feel really good, to sleep underground right now, and not have to go to class, and not have to *do* anything.”

“I guess I could see that,” Heather said. If what I’d just said had bothered her, she didn’t let on. She made it a point to empathize as much as possible. “You can’t tell me anything that I’ll think is weird,” she’d assured me. I needed the assurance. I didn’t tell her, though, what I’d written earlier that semester, about sand castles:

build a sand castle out of my ashes (mixed w/ sand), below the tide line while the tide is out. pack it down hard, don’t use tools, just your hands. you can decorate it with shells, though, if you like or anything you want, so long as it’s pretty. so don’t keep my ashes, the tide will take them, but you can keep a shell if you want to

The next day the idea had struck me as morbid. I liked it, but I knew it was the kind of thing that would alarm most people I knew. I didn’t want anyone afraid for me.

Who would build the sand castle anyway? I’d visualized children building it, children who didn’t know that a person’s ashes were mixed with the sand, children who didn’t know what that meant, or children who knew but who were innocent or accepting enough not to be bothered by such things. I savored the image, but I didn’t share it. Most people I knew then spooked easily.

Dana and I—I remembered—knew darkness. We could acknowledge it gravely, with controlled alarm—could acknowledge without being taken.

We had emailed some. Our schedules were hectic, though, and we both had to make college friends. I acquired a close enough circle of girlfriends, girls I met during my first semester, when we were all new. My closest friend was a couple years older than me, though—deep, philosophical, idealistic, creative. I made note one day that what I had with him was even better than the “knowing” I’d shared with Dana, and I hoped that I was speaking truth and not betrayal. He used to play the pianos on the drafty top floor of the oldest building on campus. I’d listen; he told me that my listening shaped his improvisation; he told me that I helped him play.

He’d said we should draw a giant picture in the commons, using chalk, after everyone had left. Our school had a curfew, and “late minutes.” We used late minutes to draw a giant unit circle—for fun and for love of circles and trigonometry and truth. This circle was perfect, or much closer to perfect than the cheerfully lopsided one Dana and I had drawn on the beach. He and I labeled it. My chalk-numbers were straight and graceful; his were thick and insistent and bold. The unit circle stayed in the commons longer than we expected. For days and days, the unit circle made it never rain. We both loved rain. After the rain eventually came, weeks later, we drew more chalk circles; this time, the moon’s phases, labeled with degrees and dates.

We arranged ideas. We sculpted theories, about God and life, about anything. Sunday afternoons, he drove his Volvo too fast down West Tennessee back roads; I assured him I didn’t have anything I needed to do.

Once he spoke, marveling, of the way our thoughts came together to create new things—that what they created was beautiful.

When the dissolution bloomed, it unraveled me.

I needed someone who knew me. I'd stored myself in him, outside my own mind. Dana was in East Tennessee.

Melanie, who lived across the hall—Melanie, with her easy and contagious laugh, who'd reminded me of Dana when I first met her, sent me a handmade invitation to join her at Chickasaw State Park, to build a sand castle. We sat on the dock and ate a pint of Dutch chocolate ice cream, then we settled in the volleyball court. The sand castle was small, but it had enough charm, and building it had been healing. The best part of the afternoon was Amber, the eight-year-old girl who'd hovered around us until we asked if she wanted to help, and she did. Then we showed her how to make clover chains, and we decorated the castle with leaves and flowers, in lieu of shells.

May 2005

“The beach? And shells? And can I build a sand castle?” I was excited, but it was a strange excitement, potent, but thin and yellow and toxic. I had made it, barely, through the spring semester, and I was at home—to rest, heal, regroup. First, though, my family had decided that we all needed a vacation, so we drove down to St. George's Island, just miles from where I'd been with Dana and Mom and Granny two years before.

I was as out of sorts in Florida as I had been in Tennessee. I'd planned to build a sand castle, a fantastic one. But even though I'd looked forward to the venture, the task, though pleasurable, seemed to require too much effort, time, concentration. *Like life*, I thought grimly. I was worse than tired.

The first night we'd arrived, my fifteen-year-old brother Daniel had run out to the beach and had dug a great hole, wide and deep enough to climb into. His energy found a place for my lethargy. Daniel's hole was comfortable to lie in, especially with a quilt. I was deep enough in the ground that I couldn't see what else was going on at the beach. I could rest without distraction.

I didn't build anything that week, but my dad and brothers did. I was dismayed at Tyler's technique—we had worked closely together when we were much younger, Daniel joining us after our art was well-developed. But here was Tyler, focusing solely on the outward shape of his edifice, with no thought as to how one might get in. I've always felt dissatisfied with sand castles that don't have a real inside. Even if the castle is too small for people, there needs to be at least the *idea* that one could go in, sit down and be cooled and smile at the ceiling, feeling satisfied and safe.

“Aren't you going to dig the tunnel?” Daniel asked. “How are they going to get inside?” Tyler wasn't interested. Daniel said, “Fine, I'll dig the basement,” and he did. I didn't say this, because I didn't know how well I'd fight back if Daniel denied it, but I knew he'd learned this approach from me. My work had not been in vain.

I haven't touched sand since my family's vacation. I think about rows of black stones on shores; I think about zen gardens.

I've been sculpting my life, my heart and my mind and experiences, sometimes at the impulse of art, sometimes strategically, out of necessity. I went back to school that fall and compiled a long reading list. I packed down new walls out of the loose sand from collapsed annexes. I hiked high, out to where no tide could reach. It rained. It didn't rain. Melanie and I laughed, reminiscing about our sand castle. Dana and I had coffee, caught up. (She'd tried to drive to California. She ran out of gas in Nashville; there she'd found a job, an apartment.) We said, "We are beautiful"—gravely. We knew something had happened; somehow, we were emerging. We breathed, savoring life.

The best part of building a sand castle: when two people are digging the tunnel, from either side of the well-packed mound, there comes a point—and both anticipate this—when their fingers must meet, gritty and giddy, triumphant. I've been writing about sand castles, but what I mean is disillusionment and despair, hope and wishful thinking, acceptance and the exploration of reality, and the communion of souls—or if "communion" is too strong a word, then the briefest brushing of soulish fingertips.

Stardust

by *Sheila Black*

Even when you don't want to, you look—
so much noise these grackles
make. Clumped along the high-tension wires
scalped above the HEB. The skies
in the summer a violent orange, here where
oil wells burn twenty-four seven in the flat fields.
We hear the trains all night long.
Sometimes they stop, red lights flashing.
A pause in the arteries. What possible longing?
A woman is found at Walmart dead in her car,
a suicide unnoticed for three months.
Even when you don't want to, the stories
draw your vagrant attention. You keep wanting
to know. And the grackles—voices? Are
they? Tense guttural caws and cries.
Sometimes they lift an army of wings, float from
one side of the street to the other. Down below
you flick through the radio dial—bad eighties pop,
hip-hop, Bowie singing about a lonely space
alien who sacrifices himself to save us.

Two Letters from Queer Woods

by Jess Bennett

The First Letter: Hekktor, a Royal Physician

Your Majesty,

Understand that, as a physician peculiar to these peculiar days, I draft no form for the soul or magic, nor do I take heed from mystics that claim a realm beyond ours. My education at the lyceum focused on bodies freshly brought from Death's tender mercies, caked in mud, and still soaked with mourner's tears. In all my years of dissimulating this human form, no specter, no shade, no elements associated with the ever-elusive spirit have passed from the dead.

But you will recall that these are peculiar days.

I had been summoned by yeoman Howards to investigate an act of divine intervention in his village. A young woman by the name of Judyth had been pledged to a serf. Days before their nuptial ceremony, she developed a strong morning sickness and a thickness in her abdomen that suggests pregnancy. The trouble, you see, is that she claimed to be chaste.

"In the way of our new laws, I first petitioned for her punishment," yeoman Howards told me, "yet she insisted that no man had penetrated her. As is custom, we took her to the midwives, who confirmed by examining her sex that she had been with no man."

He proposed divine intervention from the God of Mother Church, but I knew better than such foolishness. I was, however, confused by how quickly her body acclimated to the stages of pregnancy, at least by yeoman Howards' account. At first, I took this to be an error on his part, and I agreed to see the woman.

I first sought counsel with her husband, I confess, for my own pleasure. Your Majesty, a man with your taste for abject humiliation will appreciate this much. I take deep satisfaction in cuckoldry. Not my own, of course, but from other men whose wives show such delicious, sluttish behavior so as to upset their duller halves. Better yet, I take immense pleasure in seeing a cuckold who bears witness to his wife's sexual endeavors, one who is taken with such frustration and arousal that he frees his engorged sex and violently pleasures himself.

The woman's husband, serf Corinth, agreed to house me during my stay. His frame was tall and wide. He had a thick red beard that nearly covered his jagged teeth. He slouched and lumbered, periodically readjusting his girthy sex in his loose trousers. At first sight of him, my fantasies of cuckoldry increased, and I hungered for the sexual frustration of this beastly person.

Or so I thought. Alas, his air was calm and pleasant.

"Yes," said serf Corinth, "my wife is with child."

"Are you the sire?"

"No."

“Is it true, as yeoman Howard claims, that she is chaste?”

“Aye, she’s ne’er been pricked by my needle, sir, or by any tool, all told.”

I wanted so dearly to spit in his face for his vulgar, haughty language.

“Are you a man of the Spirit?” he asked me.

I responded, “I am firstly in service to the king. My work with Mother Church comes by virtue of education and status. Do you so attribute any spiritual weight to the gilded tabernacles or the clergymen’s rings?”

But my words had so dazzled him that he stared at me in confusion.

“Please, take me to the woman,” I instructed, having been exhausted by his company.

The woman’s chambers were surrounded with rugs and tapestries that she made for the village’s benefit. She herself was resting on a pallet of many furs. Her look was mistrustful. After exchanging introductions, I bid her to disrobe, whereby I began my examination. First, I placed my hand on the woman’s stomach and waited until, most assuredly, the child kicked within her womb, a sensation which chills me as always. The latter portion of my investigation remained physical, as I confirmed the midwives’ findings. However, in this tedium, it dawned on me that I had heard of a case similar to this from the Northern Islands. There, a dispute of parentage erupted after the wife of a cattleman gave birth to a Southernset child. You’ll recall that all the children of Southernset are born with wine-colored birthmarks, and this woman’s child bore such a mark on his left ear, same as the only Southernset man in the village. While the pedigree of the Northern Islanders may appear dubious enough, I have on good faith that such folk keep to themselves. All the same, she claimed to have never been with the other man. It was extracted from that man’s confession that he had lain with his own Southernset wife that day and that she later visited the woman in question. From these materials, the local physician concluded that the women had lain together, facilitating the exchange of seed.

I began to wonder if Judyth was of the same sexual disposition, but I have learned from time among these common people that such an accusation must not come unannounced. Confessions of sexual misconduct come out only in deep inquisition, so my questions took a spiritual turn. We engaged in the following dialogue:

“Have you done as other women who lay grain and corn on a pallet for them to roll around in, only to take the kernels that stick to their naked bodies and grind them into a fine powder for baking Lover’s Bread?”

“I’ve taken no such action.”

“Lucifera, Legion, Baphammet, Archeon, Baâl, Layath, Epos, Malthüs, Baleam, Vepaar, Osee, Gremorie, Elegos, Fockalor, Raum, Belial, Salpsin, Raheb, Ronova, Surgatta, these are the names of demons who have been sighted near and around the local villages. Upon hearing these names, do you experience ecstasy?”

“No demon’s name provokes me.”

“Perhaps a woman’s name?” And this question made her tense. I redirected my inquisition. “Are you in the habit of some women who place a talisman on another woman’s maidenhead and rotate it just so to elicit fervor?”

“I tell no lies to physicians or inquisitors.”

“You tell no truths as well. Do you do as other women who, at night, exit their bodies to lure the daughters of Mother Church away from their devotions, their husbands, their children?”

“My body stays with me.”

“And whose body stays with you as well?”

She did not answer.

“Not even your husband’s? I request the names of women you have seduced.”

“I am no seducer.”

“Have you known other women in a husbandly way?”

“What difference is it if I have?”

“While such practices flourished under the old religion and heathen ways of thinking, such practices will no longer be tolerated under Mother Church. But please,” my tone softened, “I have been too intrusive. Too harsh. No harm will come to you or your bedfellows if you tell me the truth.”

“Yes, I have had other women for bedfellows.”

“Have you perhaps been with a woman who has recently received the ejaculate of a man, thereby enabling you to become pregnant?”

“That sounds completely preposterous.”

“How else do you explain this pregnancy?”

“This is a child of earth magic.”

Your Majesty, it took great pains to hide my sudden disgust. The villagers here feel no shame for practicing earth magic, despite your edict in partnership with Mother Church.

She continued, “Though we love each other, my husband and I have no appetite for each other’s bodies. Still, we saw fit to bring a child into our world, so we visited a local coven—practitioners of earth magic.”

“And who leads this coven?”

“Mirabelle. A wise old mother.”

I reminded her, in tender performance, that no harm would come to her or those who enabled the child’s birth. “Please, fair Judyth, describe the ritual by which you became pregnant. Spare no details.”

“First, Mirabelle set her cauldron over a fire in the middle of her cottage. She gathered her sisters around her, and they were all quiet, reverent. She said, ‘Loved ones, we are here to aide sister Judyth in her quest to bear a child by the earth.’ She spoke some prayers in a tongue I did not recognize and then petitioned her sisters to present the body. She asked who would account for the child’s feet, and one woman stepped forward, saying, ‘I shall. Eggshells have I, so that the child may step with bare feet upon the earth and feel no prick of thorn nor pierce of quill.’ The woman added her shells to the cauldron, and Mirabelle inquired of the child’s legs. Another woman said, ‘I shall contribute stalks from yeoman Howards’ farm. Sisters, look!’ She held the stalks in the air and wound them around her wrists, saying ‘See how they ne’er break? They shall support him as he stands.’ Like the former, she deposited the offering into the cauldron as Mirabelle called out for the belly and chest. A beautiful sister came to the cauldron and said, ‘Here in my hands rest the child’s very torso. I add a hollow gourd for the belly so that he may enjoy large feasts. For the chest, I add reeds that they may

bind around his heart like ribs.’ For the arms, a harsher sister came forward and said, ‘He shall have freshly hewn switches for defense against his bitterest enemies.’ But for the hands, this same sister added feathers, reasoning, ‘With hands as soft as these, he shall have his go of lovers. I know few men and women who can resist a tender touch.’ For the head, Mirabelle cracked a robin’s egg and emptied its yolk into the brew, claiming, ‘As with the robin’s yolk, may this young man’s mind continue to develop and eventually take flight.’ The sisters resumed their prayers in song, leaping over the cauldron, such as I have never seen matrons of their age perform. Once their dance had ended, Mirabelle brought out a device with a spout and knob, and with it, she drew some of the concoction into a spouted sack. Tenderly, she guided the application to my sex and wetted my maidenhead, then the very inside of me. By a few days’ time, I bore the signs of pregnancy, as I do now.”

During this explanation, her tone shifted from frightened to tender. Periodically, she would stroke and hold her belly. Halfway through her confession, her husband sat down beside her and took her hand. Their general manner conveyed no condemnation of their actions. Evidently, there is an abundance of fealty for earth magic left under Your Majesty’s rule.

Shortly after these proceedings, Mirabelle and her coven were tried for practicing the old religion. Being found guilty, they were strung up by their necks until dead. Serf Corinth and Judyth were sentenced to execution as well, yet they escaped in the middle of the night. I suspect yeoman Howards assisted their flight, though that is a legal matter for another day. I assume they are seeking shelter elsewhere in these queer woods. I conclude from my findings that the villages and enclaves—perhaps even the open forums—well buried in the wilderness bear equal if not greater offenses to Mother Church’s and Your Majesty’s authority. I recommend sending out other physicians, ministers, holy men, or whomever you see fit to expel evil from the land. May your kingdom prosper in the name of sovereignty.

Your humble servant,

Hekktor

In Nomine Sanitas

✠

The Second Letter: Brother Johansson, a Scribe

Yeoman Howards,

I have been instructed by one of the monastery's recent charges to message you thus. Some months ago, we received two refugees from your village who were fleeing execution for practicing the old faith. One of them, a woman by the name of Judyth, was pregnant with a child of earth. Perhaps you are not aware, as the refugees tell me that you are unfamiliar with earth magic, that such pregnancies go at a rapid pace. The other brothers and I successfully delivered the child with the assistance of a midwife from the late Mirabelle's order. Presently, the child is without any ailments and will live to see a fruitful life, by the earth's grace. Her husband instructed me to take dictation of the following message.

"Howards, old friend, you couldn't have known the dangers behind summoning one of the king's physicians. E'en Judyth and I were blind to the hate that had developed against earth magic. We thought it best that you hear from us before we and the monastery's students and practitioners retreat farther into the woods. We're in danger, as the king's men have been instructed to suppress all displays of queer spiritual practice, including those found in open forums such as the monasteries. Ne'er seek us. If we're destined to meet again, our paths will cross. I'll dearly miss the joy you brought our young household. I'll 'specially miss you as a bedfellow. I've found comfort with some of the students here, aye, yet many can't reach all the way around me with their arms as you could. Walk with love, dearest companion."

Corinth instructed me to include one of the etchings that a student made of him in nude repose. You will find it attached to this letter. For good measure, I have also sent you my translations of our forum's most sacred and calming texts. In these troubling times, I hope they provide you some sense of relief.

Your Brother in Love,

Johansson

In Nomine Terrae

✠

In Vain

by Melody C. Johnson

You say “god” but you do not mean it.
Instead, you mean *museum* and *marble*.
You mean *forest* and *government*.
You mean *blood* and *breath*.
You say “god” but not his name.
In one fair syllable
you speak of silken nights
Scale ten pain
of your fist pounding the steering wheel
your hands raised in surrender and disbelief.

When you really want to pray
so that the god you do not name will hear you
feel the prayer and do not speak
for the spirit maketh supplications
and when you really want to pray
in a way that makes this god hear
go out and find a flower petal newly fallen,
and just *feel* the prayer.

A Schizophrenic Lover Talks to God

by Greg Maddigan

I.

I plunk stones into the slack waters of my Identity
and the ripples give me Anxiety because instead of thinking of me,
I am thinking of you, your head cocked just so, your fingers lingering on the
page. I know the seasons change the way we both think, yet
the earth still spins like a loom, a dancer who only knows one move.
We both fear we are slipping with her tilt, pall-born away
with white flowers and white gloves. We can't tell what matters anymore.
Maybe these Words themselves contain our matter,
like the filigree of some ancient text we long to believe.
How can we have rotated the sun more than thirty-three times
and still know so little?

II.

One of us will always want to claim clarity.
In the beginning was The Word.
The Word tented among us, sat beneath a tree, radiant,
King of our migrant hearts. The Word made me euphoric and You melancholic,
Me guilty and You compassionate, Me saintly and You extravagant.
I want to recite the old knowledge from rote memory.
You want to ask the daunting and absurd questions.
You want to kneel. I want to fly.
I want to knead the rosary beads. You want to contemplate the river flowing
Endlessly.
Can we do this, together?

III.

The summer thunder jars my awe and your
nostalgia for the Garden. Beneath the rain, the forest life—
the inchworm inching, the velvety buck bedding down in the itchy
grass with flies on his pupils, the songbirds mobbing the Pygmy Owl on the low branch—
moves to a rhythm, as if we don't matter, as if we will never matter. No wonder we envy the Cormorants,
compasses oriented to the sun, faces streaked yellow, never unsure,

sitting in a patient line on a log beneath the emerald slope of the mountains.
On cloudy days, they wait for a revelation, eyeing the Grebes' nests,
grassy circles in the water, ringed holiday wreaths foretelling glad tidings
which the Cormorants seem to already know. You would be a Cormorant if you could,
stubbornly waiting to matter. To me.

IV.

These Words matter, coalescing in the air
between my mouth and your ear canal.
Your lips are a conch, a secret we share. I know you . . .
the hope in your heart, your dark dawns, your pettiness, your brilliance,
your longings, your agony in the garden.
I want to walk down tree bark with You, with the confidence and certainty of
dripping sap.
We will crack seeds in the dark crevices. I want to share our
confidences, but they only brook-babble about in my head, gibberish.
The same for You, I am sure. I can only peck at the
Truth.

V.

I float on coffee, thinking of You, creating galactic halos
with skipped rocks. The water's surface is mysterious,
a skin, your skin, God's skin. I listen to the applause of thunder, the gobbling
of turkeys, and wait for darkness to wash over the land like sweet-grass smoke.
Maybe You will stay with me.
Or are You getting ready to leave?
Either way, I can be sure of what I have always suspected:
the bats are roosting in the archways between my teeth;
the stealthy coal trains are ushering the earth away from us
with soothing midnight whistles; I will never stand on a piling
drying my wet wings like a karate sensei.

VI.

How I wish I were
paddling in a Cottonwood
blizzard with You.

But You already knew that,
Didn't You?

Meet me at the boat launch
past the old railroad
Trestle, or are You
there
Already?

Joining Adhemar

by B. S. Roberts

Thrice around the walls
led by Desiderius's prophecy
this long journey neared its end

Hunger

Thirst

Pain

Strife

Can always bring out the worst in mankind
a simple barefoot procession
urged the swords and bows

[made feverish by pious call]

out of stasis

and though the fast left stomachs echoing,
righteous hatred was coaxed to churning.

Corpses of ships

refurbished for adverse cause

shepherded towards the Saint's gate

[for the first time they would fall]

a flock of hungry towers

eager to sate their wicked appetite.

Cracked open, the city turned to wounded prey

I walk with my companions amongst blood

siphoned by broken cobblestone

bounty of violent pilgrimage

bodies pollute the streets.

Here creed, age, race [you] matter not
breathing has become a sin
set to be penanced by an abrupt end.
With every step my wayward feet take
the fire of my core burns low
embers crumble to ash
these are actions that should be condemned
not advertised as an alternative to prayer.
Light fades from my eyes
as I view the desecration
but is finally extinguished
after I see steel grow from my chest.



Image by Martin Krafft

Disobedient Faith

by Martin Krafft

Cardboard Cross Part 1

The four men at the picnic table do not make eye contact as I approach.

“I got a project that I want your help on,” I say.

These unhoused inhabitants of Tucson’s De Anza park are not impressed. The looks range from indifferent to disgruntled.

“What’s that?” a man, dressed in a blue jumpsuit, finally asks.

“I’m building a cross.”

Silence.

“Out of cardboard,” I go on. “And I want you to give me something to decorate it. Something to represent your experience on the street.”

“Why you doing all that?”

“It’s an art project.”

More silence. They do not know me. This park is their space, at least for now. I have invaded it. Sometime soon the cops may move them along. The cops are the ones who really own the park.

“Can you tell me where to find some cardboard?”

One of the men points. I retrieve a box from the dumpster and, after some cutting, fashion it into a cross. They watch me.

I am twenty-seven and have started calling myself a Christian, though doing so sometimes makes my stomach turn. I want to confront Christianity, but not as an outsider, so I am determined to grapple with the symbols of Christianity. I am still an outsider, a dubious believer, trying to redefine the term “Christian” rather than accept my exclusion from its mainstream manifestations.

I sit down with another group and introduce myself. They are Black. I am white. They are poor. I have at least access to wealth. They do not know me. It has been a year since I moved to Tucson, and this is my first time in this park, my first time seeking out the unhoused here. Maybe I don’t care anymore. Not as much, since I left Atlanta. It’s exhausting to care. Easy to look away. This is class privilege in action, coming to their park with demands rather than doing the work first to build relationships. I have forgotten the importance of those relationships.

“You here to make a cross or you here to sit?” asks a woman, years of concern and distrust etched on her face.

The years I spent getting to know the unhoused in Atlanta do not matter here.

“Well, right now I’m sitting.”

She shakes her head.

“A man died on that cross,” chides an older man. “A man died on that cross, and I ain’t gonna put nothing on it.”

“Thanks anyway.” I keep walking.

“Well, I’m not sure I believe anymore, to tell you the truth,” says a man, Darryl, lying on a bench. “I mean, how could God let all this happen? Look around. We’re all miserable here. I mean, really miserable. How’s God gonna let that happen?”

“You can write that,” I say, improvising the parameters of the project.

“I don’t want to write that.”

“That’s fine too.”

Darryl’s depth of belief has shaken his belief. Would Darryl consider himself a Christian? Does the term even matter? To care about the term may be to care more about how one is viewed than about the faith itself. These are questions that I have been grappling with for years, since my time at the Open Door, where I was first thrust into the idea of Christianity as a catalyst for justice.

Enter Open Door

“We got two churches,” Ed stands and declares. “We got a white church and a Black church.” He jabs his hand for emphasis, jabs his hand again. “We got a Christ church, and we got a Jesus church. Jesus is the Black church. Jesus is the church for racial justice.” Flecks of spit fly onto the faces of assembled volunteers. “The church that is not for racial justice is a dead church. It survives by eating the flesh of the poorest of the poor as a vulture feasts upon roadkill!”

I have never experienced faith like this: a loud, angry faith. Ed, white, college educated, and his wife, Murphy, founded the Catholic-Worker-inspired community where I am now living for a four-month volunteer stint. For the past thirty years, the Open Door Community has served food to Atlanta’s unhoused. Before soup kitchen meals, we gather to learn, reflect, discuss. The servers represent a diverse group: Black, white, queer, straight, formerly unhoused, former prisoners, those who have enjoyed financial and legal security, the mentally ill and the less ill.

I am twenty-one years old, just graduated from college, a recovering libertarian with a newfound thirst for justice. The son of a moderate, though devout, Catholic father and a sociable Quaker mother, I have viewed religious practice as alternately an obligation or an excuse to get people together to chat and drink coffee. Ed projects a radical, though historically straightforward, view of Jesus: itinerant political prisoner put to death by the state. This is Jesus the revolutionary. I am not wholly convinced by Ed’s declarations; I do not need to be. I am convinced by the work.

I serve a bowl of soup to Walking Steve, who most of the time mutters to himself. He smells like piss, but I try to shake his hand each time I see him, then wash my hand as soon as possible.

I mop out the showers that my new, unhoused acquaintances use to wash the grime off their bodies once a week. There are pennies and twigs and Band-Aids that clog up the drain, so I pick them out and toss them in the trash.

I wash the feet of my new unhoused friend, Doug.
“You a brave man,” he says as I trim another greenish toenail.
“That’ll be twenty bucks,” I tease. “Tips appreciated.”
“Twenty bucks, huh? Why don’t you give me twenty bucks?”

I do not want to believe in Jesus as savior, because to believe would devalue the act of building community, make the action about the possible reward more than the reward inherent in the action itself. I do not need to believe in Jesus to follow his example by washing feet and trying to love my neighbor. But not believing makes me wonder if I am in the right place, a place where belief in Jesus has been articulated as the necessary motivator for action. I do not know of any other group committed to this work in such an unapologetic way, refusing to make excuses for a capitalistic social structure that discards the non-producers.

Sordid Serrano

On May 15th, 1989, New York Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato gave a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate condemning the photograph, “Piss Christ,” by Andres Serrano. The image features a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist’s urine. As much as D’Amato hated the photograph, he hated even more that the National Endowment for the Arts had given federal funding for it to tour as part of Serrano’s “Body and Soul” exhibit. D’Amato went so far as to tear a page from the exhibition catalogue on the Senate floor, calling the work a “deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity.” If that was not enough political fodder for Republicans, Robert Mapplethorpe’s homosexual, sadomasochistic photographs soon followed, also supported by federal arts funding. D’Amato and fellow Senator Jesse Helms launched a series of onslaughts on the National Endowment for the Arts, calling for “decency” standards to be required for arts funding as well as a significant cut to that funding.

As a mostly self-trained entrant into the “art world,” I somehow avoided seeing “Piss Christ” for years during my development as a photographer, though one could not avoid hearing about it. Photographers I met discussed Serrano with a mix of envy and disdain. They were envious of Serrano’s recognition and disdainful towards the combativeness of his work. I mirrored their stance, considering Serrano a showman more than an artist without having seen a single photo of his.

I expected “Piss Christ” to be ugly, tactless, confrontational for the sake of confrontation. When I finally saw it, I was entranced by the obscure, amber, bubbling image. Made with a lens filter, the photograph has a beautiful yellow-reddish tint. It is an otherworldly image, one could even say a religious image, consumed by the cross.

Cardboard Cross Part 3

Two men and a woman sit atop a playground slide.
“Mind if I come up?”
“Come on.”

They are Corn-fed, Omar, and Omar's female friend, who doesn't introduce herself. They are intrigued. Corn-fed starts writing on a piece of legal paper from his pack. He has just been released from six years of prison. He knows his Bible verses but not how to spell, and every fifth word or so he asks for assistance.

"S-i-n-c-e," spells the woman.

"Cops, man," says Omar. "They'll be moving us along for any old thing. We're always moving along, 'cause the cops don't want us to get too comfortable. Media blames Trump for everything bad, but I was out here before him, and I'll be out here after him. Cops are the ones to blame."

"Trump's a dick," I remark, reflexively.

"I voted for him."

"You what?"

"He's good for the economy."

I am too surprised to feel my normal level of animosity towards Trump supporters.

"I'm Cuban," he goes on, "and my family used to be rich. They had plantations and shit. Now they're poor. That's because of socialism."

"But Trump's just giving things away to the rich." They took your family's money because they had too much, I think.

"Doesn't affect me."

"You got men running around dressed as women," adds Corn-fed. "It ain't right. These are end times."

"Seems to me like the rich people want to turn us against each other," I counter.

"Just ain't right," says Corn-fed, unconvinced.

The street is a complex place, a scarcity of privileges pitted against each other. Too confusing a place for me to insert my views of the world with any confidence.

Corn-fed writes and writes, then tapes his paper onto the cardboard cross.

"Where should I put it up?" I ask.

"Church on University," says Omar. "They used to let us stay there. We tried to keep it clean. Some people were using. I tried to kick 'em out, but I couldn't keep track of 'em all. Now we ain't allowed there no more."

In the morning, I tape the cross with Corn-Fed's writing to the church gate. A simple act, one that will not be seen by many but at least by whoever manages the church grounds. A simplistic act, one that glosses over the difficulty of offering hospitality to the unhoused. A symbolic act, but of any importance to the unhoused with whom I have spoken?

The cross is a reminder for me of the importance and difficulty of building relations with those who have been taught to be wary of everything around them. And the importance, too, of treading lightly and listening and being okay with refusal, understanding when a place is not my place.

Reflecting, I see the cross is more for me than for the unhoused—grappling with poverty and the symbolism of the cross is what *I* want Christianity to be about. My effort to give voice simultaneously demonstrates my willingness to try to control that voice. As an artist, I have decided to retain a certain degree of curatorial oversight. I admit that I have tried to take a leading rather than a supporting role towards the

unhoused. I lead in part because I am an artist who has the privilege to spend my time thinking of ways to create. Do I lead in part because I do not trust the initiative and ability of the unhoused to lead?

Exit Open Door

There has been a theft. Over \$500 from the Open Door's petty cash fund. The office lock was not broken, so it must be someone with a key: someone who lives in the house.

"We cannot function as a community without trust," Ed roars at the emergency community meeting. "We do not have trust until we know who has stolen from us, from the community. We need to pray. We need to come together and discover the truth and heal."

Part of that "healing" entails Ed accusing each of the four Black male residents of the theft, one after the other. The rest of us are too wrapped up in the manufactured crisis, too afraid of Ed, to call him out.

Ed says stay, but I have to leave. For the past week, I have been attending a death penalty trial in support of the defendant, and the sentencing is tomorrow. I wrote Jeremy a note telling him I'd be there.

"I told Jeremy I'd go to the trial," I tried to reason with Ed after the meeting.

"It's easy to walk away from this community," he storms. "If you want to be a part of the community, you have to stand with us when the flood waters threaten to wash over us."

When I return from the trial, I am told, not by Ed himself, that I have two hours to pack up and move out. Ed's militancy that had once inspired now revolts me. I have lost my community, my convergence with faith.

Body and Soulful

Sociologist Steve Dubin calls the political response to Serrano's photograph a "politics of diversion" that manipulates public response to achieve political ends. If one is looking for an explanation for the social ills facing America, "Piss Christ" can be used to explain it all, from drugs to violence to job loss. Each of these crises can be traced to a breakdown in values: good Christian values. "Piss Christ" shows how far the country has moved from its Christian roots. By claiming the moral high ground, Republican political leaders were able to obscure their own personal shortcomings as well as their efforts to dismantle government support programs. The "blame the messenger" strategy proved of immense political value, allowing GOP politicians to unify, anger, and energize their base. These politicians coddled the religious elements of the public, and these elements seem to have been content to be coddled: the ultimate political correctness.

Finally looking through Serrano's photobook *Body and Soul*, I see image after image as an engagement with faith. "What the nuns told us in school was that we worship not the crucifix but Christ," Serrano said, defending his images. In "Heaven and Hell," an old cardinal looks on with sordid satisfaction at a blood-stained, roped-up woman. In "Madonna and Child I and II," the light is yellower than in "Piss Christ" though still striking, sublime. The photos, too, are an engagement with the body: close-ups from the morgue, victims unidentifiable. They are quiet and clinical and spiritual; we are just a body when the spirit has left, they posit. Rather than being sacrilegious, Serrano is in fact grappling with the very heart of faith: whether symbol takes

precedence over substance. The work is a comprehensive critique of Christianity as white-supremacist-enabler, as back-turned-towards-the-poor. Maybe the comprehensiveness of the critique is what fuels opposition to the image; those who rush to condemn it deep down know their failings. Serrano suggests that symbols are worthless in and of themselves; their worth comes only from the actions and beliefs they inspire.

Open Door Revisited

Six years after getting kicked out of the Open Door, I am buying dinner for foot-washing Doug. Nothing fancy, a sub-soda combo. We have stayed friends. I visit him whenever I come back to Atlanta. He is not hard to find, almost always at either the library or Freedom Park or the Rite-Aid.

He likes the idea of the cardboard cross—maybe just to appease me. We walk down to the Rite-Aid parking lot where he’s slept for as long as I’ve known him. I give him a pair of scissors, and he takes the cardboard that he slept on the night before and starts cutting. He makes the cross out of two neat, large strips and carefully secures it with tape. Then he starts scrawling on the cardboard: “It is a very bad thing to take away housing from the homeless.”

Doug’s Rite-Aid is across the street from where the Open Door Community used to be. Ed and Murphy finally sold their shares of the house and moved to Maryland to live with their daughter. The building has been torn down and is in the process of being turned into high-income housing.

THUD. THUD. THUD. I smash a rock that was once part of the Open Door’s building into a railroad spike that I have pilfered from a soon-to-be-paved section of the Belt Line, Atlanta’s artery of gentrification. I am trying to puncture through the wooden sign adorned with a picture of what the new, sleek housing will look like. Rush hour traffic slugs on by. The sign is sturdy. Only a dent.

I smash the rock again. Nothing. Why won’t the goddamn spike go in? Why did Ed and Murphy sell out? Why is Doug still on the street? And Barbara, and Winston, and Jeff. And TC, dead too soon, killed by all the stresses of being unhoused.

I smash the rock with anger at the Christians who would rather condemn Serrano than face his condemnations. I smash the rock with anger at Ed and those Christians who care about the poor but lash out with their own authoritarian impulses. And I am angry, too, at Jesus, or at least the account of him that is recorded in the New Testament. He is a man of mercy, some of the time, but he is also a man of pettiness and fragility, demanding adulation. The secure never demand adulation. They earn respect because of their strength and goodness. I am angry at Christianity’s emphasis on submission—a convenient standard for those wanting to cling to their power. I am angry at the faithfulness of faith, at the emphasis on belief over love. I question whether love grounded in obedience can even be called love. How can one love and not find the act of loving rewarding in and of itself?

And I wonder if my anger is self-righteous and harmful like Ed’s anger and D’Amato’s anger. Their anger demanded obedience. Ed’s, to himself. D’Amato’s, to a petty, prudish God and to the government as enforcer of that vision. They were convinced of their rightness, just as I am convinced. I do not doubt the rightness of Ed’s cause for anger—Ed spent too much time getting to know the unhoused for me to do so—but I doubt

its manifestation. I examine my own anger and do not doubt the rightness of the cause: Doug's disintegrating feet and the unending stream of hungry faces I saw at the Open Door. Wanting to be loving, I wonder if I can be both loving and angry at the same time. I have seen enough anger from my father to be wary of the attempt to do so. Anger sustains action while at the same time threatening to consume one's being with bitterness.

I smash the rock again, to no avail, then laugh at the thought of my commuter audience inching along with mild curiosity at my action. My body shakes with exertion. I stick the spike and cross through the chain-link fence and hurry back to the Rite-Aid before someone calls the police.

Doug and I sit at the Rite-Aid and watch the cars inching by the cardboard cross.

"Looks pretty good," he says.

"You're an artist," I say.

The cross will not make sense to any of the newly arrived gentrifiers. The cross is not meant for them but rather for the unhoused of the Poncey Highland neighborhood, though they did not ask for a cross. The cross is a marker to commemorate the place where they used to shower and eat and get new clothes and check their mail and get their feet washed and sit and talk and laugh and mumble. It is also a marker for me, to commemorate the place where I was immersed in the lives of the unhoused, to remember a place that offered a flawed, though powerful, vision of a different social order.

Putting up the cross is my own at least partially self-centered attempt at an act of faith. If faith is the "capacity to spiritually apprehend divine truths, or realities beyond the limits of perception or of logical proof" (OED), I am not convinced of the veracity of my apprehensions, but I gladly partake in the process of apprehending. I would rather try to apprehend than allow myself to become apprehensive. There is not much room to be apprehensive when one sees the raw sores of the world. There is room for love and room for action and sometimes room for anger. Not the anger that is used to quell dissent, but the anger that rekindles the fight for liberation, then releases itself. White Christ: sanitized, simplified, insecure. That is not my faith. If I am a person of faith, then Serrano's faith is my faith—a faith that is not afraid to acknowledge the piss that dripped from Black Jesus's crucified body. A disobedient faith.

Surfer Girl

by Dennis Nau

The people were all wrong, the people at our wedding. I know they were taking bets at the back end of the bar. Some said our marriage would last three weeks, some a year. It's been six years since we got married. They all lost. Still, losing is relative. Winning is too.

At the time of our wedding, I held the chair in Theoretical Physics at The University of San Diego, and I know something about relativity. I got my doctorate from Harvard. I've done consulting with NASA. I've had dinner with Stephen Hawking twice.

When I was younger, women were not generally attracted to me in spite of my academic honors. So I posted myself on the internet with one of those search engines that pops up in an irritating manner on your screen late at night. *Find your true soul mate now!* Late at night you sometimes wonder why you don't have a true soul mate. This website asked about my background and I typed it in. My doctoral thesis was on the science of wave theory. My book, *Astrophysical Wave Theory for the 20th Century and Beyond*, garnered all sorts of awards. I was on the cover of *American Scientific* in 1997. I've been published twenty-six times.

I met Susan through this internet match-making company, and it cost me \$2,800. That was a bargain. Professor Anderson, my good friend, found his wife on the internet but it cost him almost five grand. Mix-ups do occur, and I should have learned from Professor Anderson. He had several patents in the field of medical imaging. He was responsible for designing some of the first transducers that facilitated the development of positron emission tomography.

Well, he mentioned that on his compatibility chart, about his work with PET scan machines, and he was inundated with emails from women who loved pets. Professor Anderson married a woman with twenty-one cats. Oh, we weave a tangled web, whether or not we mean to deceive.

My first meeting with Susan was at Raphael's, a small Italian joint on the coast, and I was nervous. How could we be matched? Was this Susan a professor of physics at Southern Cal? Would we discuss black holes? Maybe we could talk about antimatter. I spent some time combing my hair to make myself look as intelligent as I possibly could. Maybe just a touch of gray, I thought. Maybe not. The dating service said, on their website, that first impressions were very important.

I sat at a table alone, a half-hour early, and I watched as the restaurant filled. Then this woman walked in, gorgeous. No, it couldn't be her, I thought. Physicists are not supposed to look that good.

But she was my date.

I kissed Susan's hand before she sat down, and she blushed. Physicists are not supposed to blush.

"I'm Herbert."

"I'm Susan."

We made microscopic talk about the weather, baseball, and traffic. You can always make small talk about traffic. She was beautiful, and I fell under her trance and I didn't much care at the end of our conversation that she didn't really have much of an interest in the science of physics.

"I thought about majoring in physics in college. I took five courses in physics, but after a bout with supernovas, I decided to look for subjects that were more interesting."

"What subject could be more interesting than physics?"

"Any subject other than physics like, for example, psychology."

Susan worked at a convenience store. Psychology degrees might not be all they're cracked up to be, as far as earning potential, that is. Psychology aside, Susan had one primary interest in life. She liked to surf. Thank God for internet mix-ups.

"If you catch a wave, a good wave, shortly after dawn on a day when the weather is perfect, you can ride that wave for maybe a quarter mile. You glide past these houses on the beach and you feel that you are on top of the world. You shiver a little, but it's worth it. Know what I mean?"

Of course I didn't.

"And Herbert, what do you do?"

Well, well, let me see. I investigate the fundamental principles of the universe. I talk in terms that are incomprehensible, except to other physicists. How did the universe form? What keeps it together? What is the relationship between energy and matter? Those sorts of questions.

"So, you can't advise my next-door neighbor if she should leave her husband?"

Not really. We physicists deal in the most important questions of existence, the questions of why and how, if and when. We measure time in nanoseconds; distance in light-years. We have our bases covered on both ends, the long and the short.

So, how many physicists does it take to change a light bulb?

Oh, I first heard that joke twenty years ago. Every physicist has heard that joke.

I deal in truth and I deal in irony. All of these earth-shaking, universe-rattling events that I study mean nothing. If you tell me that the earth will start to wobble on its axis and the wobble will increase over the next 100,000 years and sometime after that a new Ice Age will start, this will not cause me to alter my dining habits. I've always gone out to eat at Raphael's.

Susan followed the Grateful Dead for a number of years, she said. That didn't discourage me.

"I'm tired, Herbert—can I call you Herb—of all those idiots that followed that band and followed me. That's why I went on the internet."

"Well, Susan—can I call you Susan—it seems to me that you may have made the best choice possible for your \$2,800."

"\$2,800? I only paid \$450." I guess it helps to be blond and beautiful.

We were married two months later, right around the time of some massive sunspot activity. The best viewing areas were in the Fiji Islands. We honeymooned in Alaska.

We caught salmon up there, lots of it, and shipped it back. We had a big party, invited all our friends and colleagues, surfers and physicists, beach bums and college professors, and we ordered kilogram upon kilogram of beer, wine and other sorts of liquor, and damn near everyone we invited came, which often happens when you have free food and liquor. There were conversations about the sand and the surf and solar flare activity.

“No, approximately 186,000 miles per second, the speed of light.”

“Wow, that’s fast, man.”

That first year of our marriage was wonderful, what with the surfing finals in Hawaii and the theoretical physicists convention in Paris. The next year was even better. My consulting team and I were awarded a 3.2 million dollar grant to develop a plan to detect the existence of quarks, a theorized fundamental component of the universe. It involved qualifying a bona fide quark detector and examining sites surrounded by heavy metal locations buried at least a mile underground that were easily accessible. It was quite a grant, and my staff and I had another party.

Although I had no appreciation for surfing, the pseudo-science of the sport amused me. I designed a surfboard for Susan made out of foamed titanium, covered with an aluminum skin. That skin was hard-coated with an aluminum oxide finish infused with Teflon. She glided through the sea, Susan, and took second place in the ’98 World Women’s Surfing Competition.

I think her prize was \$3,000. I spent \$28,000 making that surfboard, but I didn’t care. She was my surfer girl.

There’s dark matter in the universe. We physicists all know it. We can’t prove it, but we know it.

I had to attend a weekend meeting with NASA in ’99. I took Susan along. Somehow, stepping out of a cab, she tripped, and snapped a bone in her ankle.

“Really, Herb, it’s nothing.”

“You’re limping, Susan.”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

She limped entirely too long. By the time Susan finally agreed to go to the doctor, the ankle had become infected. The doctors managed to save her foot, but there’s a price to pay for being stubborn. Her price was surfing. She’ll limp forever, and never ride a wave again.

Susan became a Christian, shortly after that. She couldn’t surf, so she turned to God.

I’m a physicist. I don’t know God.

This led to some awkward dinner conversations about the meaning of life.

“Well, evolution teaches us . . .”

“I don’t give a damn about evolution, Herb. Everyone believes in evolution. I want to know why.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why? Why is there creation at all?”

“Well, that’s not an easy question to answer.”

I had to leave, in the middle of that conversation, to go observe the convergence of two of the moons of Jupiter. This was more than idle curiosity. We physicists knew what their orbit was, but we didn’t know the

speed of their rotation, versus their distance from Jupiter. An exact time of their convergence could clear up these matters.

“So how important is this?” Susan asked me before I left.

“Well, extremely important.”

“How will it affect life on earth?”

“Not at all.”

“How could it be important then?”

I went to the observatory that night, and Jupiter’s moons converged just slightly before we predicted they would converge, so we recalculated our figures and patted ourselves on the back, and, as I traveled home, I felt like one of those burned-out booster rockets that were used on the Apollo missions. They flared for a few minutes and then they landed in the ocean.

Nobody gave a damn about them. Towards the end, nobody much gave a damn about their payloads, either.

All of this led me to reconsider my life. I studied the most fundamental tenets of existence, like the Big Bang, when all of the matter in the universe was gathered in a sphere the size of a basketball (well, some of my colleagues claim the size of a baseball, but let’s not split hairs). Suppose some new calculations prove that it was actually the size of a marble or a beach ball. Perhaps forty people in the world would find this interesting. Well, maybe only thirty. Did all of the fundamentals of existence mean nothing? It occurred to me that there was this strange, inverse relationship. The more important things were in my profession, the less important they were to virtually every person on earth.

This revelation caused me some minor psychological trauma.

The discussions that Susan and I had at dinner became less frequent, with the evening prayer services that Susan started attending. Still, I hugged her at the end of our conversations, and she hugged back. Then, one night, as I hugged her, a thought hit me. Could Susan be seeing another man she met at her prayer meetings, another Christian man, one who shared her beliefs in the Holy Trinity—one who knew how to pray? Certain things naturally attract, such as oxygen and hydrogen.

No. It wasn’t possible. Christians, I thought, are supposed to believe in faith, hope, and love—love, eternal, death-do-us-part love. They believe in redemption, forgiveness. And they believe in prayer.

My mother knew how to pray. She prayed that I would get into an Ivy League School.

“Really?” said Susan. “I wish your mother was still alive. I’d like to talk to her about prayer. She prayed for you to succeed, and her prayers were answered. It’s all part of the space-time continuum.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were at the right space at the right time.”

“Where?”

“At Raphael’s. But I was at the right space at the right time too, Herb.”

That’s not legitimate science, just irresponsible speculation, I said. But I do know when to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, like just before I have a stroke.

She patted my head. “Just a minor thing, Herb. You were a bright light in existence, traveling that 299,792.458 kilometers per second. Of all the vast places in the universe that you could have traveled to, you ran into a brick wall, right here, on earth. What would be the odds?” A nurse’s aide looked on.

The stroke was bad. Susan held my hand in intensive care after the stents were put in by very competent professionals. I could smell antiseptics and her perfume. I started wondering about dark matter and light matter, blue and gray matter, and what, if anything, actually mattered. Was Susan like the force of gravity, the glue that holds everything together? Perhaps that force is love, I surmised, but I couldn’t say anything, all of these tubes going into and coming out of my body, not to mention the oxygen mask.

I wanted to thank Susan, but I couldn’t, not for another four weeks. I needed therapy to get me to the point where I could speak again. I was transferred to an assisted living center where they could wheel me out into the afternoon sun. Susan showed up every one of those afternoons. God, she was gorgeous, even though she wore no makeup. I’d get speech therapy three days a week.

So, we had the Big Bang. Everything got hurled for millions and trillions of miles. Sub-atomic particles started coalescing into atoms and molecules, and eventually they coalesced into love. Is that possible? It must be, because love exists, although we can’t weigh it, measure it, or determine its wavelength. This was not a topic covered in any of my college courses. I had to do a lot of soul-searching but what else are you going to do in bed? Well, if you’re going to do soul-searching, you have to admit that you have a soul.

If you admit these things, you’re on the edge if you’re a world-class physicist. Einstein said that God does not play dice with the universe, but nobody ever saw him genuflect or bow his head. Strobosky, whom all physicists revere, denigrated the notion of a deity until the day he died, when he said, on his deathbed, “I think I see the gates of hell.”

Susan never looked as lovely as she did outside the assisted living center, bending down to kiss me on the cheek, the sun behind her. Why would she take the trouble? She’d be better off if I died. I knew that. She must have known that, also.

“Your angle of reflection is bad, with these thoughts, Herb. You can’t do much worse now than ninety degrees, can you?”

“What do you know about angles of reflection,” I asked. I had to ask it three times, because I slurred my speech.

“It would have been much easier if you had directed your life toward a gas with a higher specific gravity, a liquid, or even some fairly clear visco-elastic material, like silicone caulk. We would be talking about angles of refraction, not of reflection, and a much different refractive index. You might have come out of our previous somewhat contentious conversation with just small cuts and bruises, or only a very minor stroke.”

“When did you learn about wave theory, Susan?”

“When I was nine years old, on my first surfboard.”

I progressed to the point where I could hobble around, and Susan took me home, and my monosyllabic responses were replaced with responses that had more syllables, and I no longer grunted when I needed to go to the bathroom. I simply went to the bathroom. Still, Susan stayed with me, and I thought, There's nothing in it for her.

I don't know anything about love, I realized. I know nothing about beauty. I have some inkling about truth, but likely that knowledge is limited to esoteric subjects of no use to anyone.

"Love is like a wave," Susan told me. "You have high points and low points. But it carries you along. It carries you forward, Herb. It carries you towards your ultimate goal."

"Which is?"

"Well, heaven, of course, but if you're on a surfboard it carries you towards the shore, which is your safe haven, and it makes a great deal of difference if you're good at riding the surf or if you're not. It's not easy to ride a wave, but it's like life, Herb."

"Why do you stay with me, Susan?"

"You're just a rough sea right now, Herb. And I love you."

The waves around Laguna Beach are perfect for surfers, which is probably why the coast is littered with them. Now, you take the Caribbean. That is really a study in wave theory.

"Yes," says Susan. "Around the Keys there are shallows and deep spots. You're in high waves. A quarter mile away in shallow areas, the waves increase in frequency, but their amplitude decreases. Then, of course, you have to deal with the waves that are reflected off the shore, usually at a 25- to 30-degree angle. That tends to rock the surfboard from side-to-side in an undulatory fashion. Still, I prefer Pacific waves. Well, I used to prefer Pacific waves."

I was a little more than a rough sea. I was a chain around her neck. I still am. I had mostly been a 1099 employee, a well-paid one to be sure, but one who knew what the average life expectancy was, one who heeded the health warnings about tobacco, trans-fats, and UV rays on the beach. I thought I would live forever, and I didn't put away money for the rainy day that I figured would never arrive.

"Oh," says Susan, "God's used to dealing with people like you. He deals with them every day."

No.

"Yes. Theoretical physicists are a dime a dozen."

They can't be.

"Just kidding, Herb. People who think they will live forever are a dime a dozen."

We sold our house and bought a smaller, cheaper one. The money was starting to run out. My professional associates quit visiting or sending their regards. I let my subscription to *Astrophysics Monthly* lapse. After my second stroke, we sold our house again and moved into a one-bedroom apartment. We needed the money for a good-quality wheelchair.

The strokes had affected mainly my right frontal cortex, the area mostly responsible for logical thought. A lot of the blood that should have been going there ended up toward the rear of my temporal lobe, the area

responsible for creative activity, and I suddenly could sing on key, something I had never been able to do before, something I never really even cared to do before my strokes.

“They’re sound waves, Herb. God created them so we could hear danger and our babies crying, and listen to Beethoven, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles. God’s partial to the letter B.”

“That’s nonsense,” I tried to mutter, but the left side of my mouth didn’t work properly. “God didn’t create sound waves so husbands could insult their wives,” Susan said. She bent over and kissed me.

“Why do you suppose,” Susan asked, “that you can sing well even though you can hardly talk?”

She didn’t wait for an answer.

“I’ll tell you why. God likes beauty. He doesn’t much care for smart-asses. You’re not a smart-ass anymore, Herb. You’re a string on God’s violin. Not a perfect string though. You’re still a little flat when you sing.”

Susan would wheel me out once in a while to the picnic tables outside the convenience store where she worked. They had regulars, people who came in every day for coffee or gas or simply to make small talk with the help, people who I wouldn’t have associated with had I never suffered a stroke. They’d pat me on the back, comment on the weather, ask me how I was doing.

Susan, I would think to myself, your love for me was not included in the theory of evolution that I studied, since I cannot now help you with having a brilliant offspring, like a son or a daughter who might one day discover that long coveted “Unified Theory.” We used to talk about that in grad school, like it was the Holy Grail, although none of us much believed in the Holy Grail.

Middle-aged maybe, but she still had that gorgeous wavy blond hair and those bright eyes and that smile that seemed genuine, Susan did. The odd part about it was that her smile was genuine.

Then, one night, a light flickered. I could still use my right hand, and since I couldn’t really talk very coherently, I found that I could type out messages to Susan on the PC.

“No, no, you don’t understand, Herb. Life has nothing to do with the right-hand or left-hand rotation of photons. That would be like saying it has something to do with the way you put the socks on your left foot or right foot. That has nothing to do with the path that you have to walk in life. The path you have to walk curves in and out, goes up and down, like a wave in two dimensions. God is the person who dropped the rock into the fountain and created the wave.”

The speech therapy sessions were helping. The first thing I clearly learned to say was “Fine.” I really wanted to learn to say, “Like shit, you goddam idiot, how do you think I’m doing.” That would have been a response to all the people who visited the convenience store and patted me on the head. Speech therapists don’t get involved with vulgar language.

My speech eventually got better. My walking improved. I could go down to the convenience store with a cane and say, “Good, and you?”

Bobby came into the store every day. I could tell by the tone of his voice whether it was a good day or bad day for him. He didn’t shave in the morning on the bad days. I charted out his good days and his bad days. There were three bad days to one good day, a wave bisected two thirds of the way up. Well, our standards

were too high. If we lowered them a little, it would be a classical wave, textbook. I could predict when he would be in top form. They didn't teach me that in grad school.

And I could predict when he'd be in bottom form. When he committed suicide on the last day of May, I took out my chart. Sure enough, the time of death was at the exact bottom of the curve after I extrapolated. All of existence obeyed the principles of wave theory, it seemed to me.

"Of course it does, Herb. I'm surprised you didn't realize that long ago. It has been evident for decades now, since Einstein's famous news conference, and after de Broglie presented his hypothesis. God does not just play dice with the universe," Susan said. "He cracks a whip. Well, it's a gentle whip, but it ripples like a wave does. Have you ever seen a person crack a long rawhide whip, Herb?"

"No."

"It's a sight to see. I worked on a ranch for six months. Did I ever tell you that?"

"No."

"Cattle have patterns. They wake. They sleep. They pass gas. They eat. It's all very rhythmic, a wave with a once-a-day cycle, well, 150 times a day cycle with the passing gas. Cattle breed. That's a completely different cycle. When these cycles merge, you had better stand clear. It's like the gentle waves that hit the southern California coasts in early June from the south. Surfers love them. Occasionally, a storm in the Pacific will cause waves to come from due west. There are choppy seas, but when one of those waves from the west is in sync with one of the waves from the south, you could be up in a surfboard surveying all of creation, but fearing for your life. I know. I've ridden one of those waves."

"I didn't know you worked at a ranch."

"You know less than you think, Herb."

That was apparent. Susan took me to San Diego for the bypass operation. We drove by one of those huge photo-voltaic farms with the solar collectors on the roofs, row after row, where they turn light waves into electrical waves, and these electrical waves would make their way to motors everywhere, where they were turned into electro-magnetic waves, which would power a motor, which might pump water into a fountain. There'd be a splash, and ripples. More waves. Or they might power an air compressor hooked to pneumatic portions of a printing press, which would pound out an engrossing novel, and millions of people would read that novel. Their brain waves would flicker. More and more waves.

They gave me anesthesia at the hospital in the pre-op room. Susan bent down and kissed me. I looked into her beautiful blue eyes—blue, as in the most astounding wavelength of light that God ever created, only if there is a God, mind you. She kissed me, right before the needle went into my arm. "I'll pray for you, Herb."

Somehow, I felt better because she said that. Susan has some sort of power. It emanates from her, not as powerful as magnetism maybe, but a lot more powerful than gravity. She's the Rock of Gibraltar. Those loose molecules of that delicate perfume that float around her body are only window dressing.

I survived the operation, as you probably surmised. They put in a couple more stents while they were at it. I had my new theory sewn up by the time I came out of intensive care. It accounted for all of that troublesome "dark matter" and "dark energy" that we physicists like to talk about at cocktail parties.

I nearly died on that operating table. I felt myself rise out of my body, and I stared down at the surgeons who were performing the surgery. The heart monitoring machine started making noise, noise with a frequency meant to cause you to take notice, and everyone in the operating room scrambled. Those sound waves hurt their ears. Good engineering! A surgeon cursed.

I was riding a different wave, with a wavelength that seemed half the distance of the diameter of the universe. I was on a surfboard coated with something other than Teflon-infused anodized aluminum, and I was heading towards the sun, a friendly sun. Oh, I know what Susan was talking about, I thought. I surfed around Venus, and a Beach Boys song was playing in the background. Well, it wasn't a Beach Boys song; it was a Beach Boys ringtone on a cell phone.

"Turn that damn thing off," a male voice said.

"I'm sorry, Doctor."

Maybe dark matter isn't dark. Maybe we just call it that because the eyes of physicists cannot detect certain spectrums. Perhaps dark matter is a pleasant flesh color, with blond hair, and it smiles at me, right out of intensive care. It rubs my forehead gently. The human soul, I calculated, is like a proton, has mass but no weight, is susceptible to gravity and magnetism but most of all to a smile.

The universe is expanding at accelerated rates elsewhere because there are no women with good souls farther than 125,000 light-years away. The Hubble Telescope has confirmed this. Good and evil in the human soul correspond to the high point and low point of a wave.

Cosmology is a strange science. You only have questions and more questions and billion dollar particle accelerator experiments. Nothing can be proven, only surmised.

It would answer a lot of questions, my theory; explain why the universe hasn't collapsed. Schoenberg thought we should have whispered into nothingness 300 million years ago without the dark matter. Abramson says, no, last January. This energy of the soul is keeping us all in existence. Why?

"Well, honey, you want to see your grandchild grow up now, don't you?"

"Susan," I said, "We don't have any kids. Without kids, it's hard to have grandkids."

"I'm quite pregnant, Herb." She patted her belly.

"How could I not have noticed?"

"You've been somewhat self-absorbed, Herb. I can forgive you. There are health issues after all."

"My God, I'm going to be a father. I can hardly believe it. How is our baby doing?"

Well the ultrasound test (at approximately 325 kHz) looked very good. I was somewhat concerned because some medical journals had suggested that the more optimum wavelength for an ultrasound would suggest a 350-375 kHz, but the kid was over eight months along, for heaven's sake, looked perfect.

I worked at my new theory. $K\text{-Theta} (\pi \text{ times the speed of light}) = E$ (as in Einstein's E) times the Cosmological Constant divided by the molecular weight of gold (196.97). Gold is a very heavy molecule. $K\text{-Theta}$ would be the flesh-colored matter of the universe, with blond hair, or red or brown or black, and human souls who had inhabited, were inhabiting, and would inhabit the universe. It's easy to see by this theory that a woman kissing her child has more power than almost 26 million stars, as regards energy, that is.

“Herb, you’re overstating things. Be more careful with your decimal points.”

She was right. It should have been 260,000 stars, average size stars, that is. You have to watch out for those stars formed by shock waves from supernovas. They skew everyone’s formulas.

If you were to substitute the molecular weight of Palladium for that of gold in my formula, the energy emitted by that mother’s kiss would shrink to that of 259,000 stars. Big deal.

There are three types of neutrinos. They might all want to kill me, but they could not, if my wife’s love wanted to keep me alive. Neutrinos have traditionally been designated by the $n=1/w(2)$ equation. That means that Susan’s love wins out all of the time. Neutrinos are wimpy. It’s a classic wave formation: $L=MC^3$. I took a deep breath, and I could smell a Nobel Prize, but then again, that stroke might have damaged my olfactory nerves.

Still, Susan, I asked, what’s God got to do with all of this?

“You know about all of these waves, Herb. They pulse through the universe, like electricity through a copper wire.

“Still, someone’s at the switch.”

Then a quark hit me, right between the eyes. Well, it hit the proton in an atom in my frontal cortex. This atom was part of a very important cell in the brain that causes a person to straighten up and fly right. It didn’t hurt, just caused me to lighten up.

I’m sorry. I still slur my words. It caused enlightenment.

Susan went into labor at the cashier’s station in the convenience store. I could legally drive by then. I picked her up. Customers were cheering for her, waving, giving a thumbs-up sign.

Susan got into the car. She threw them a kiss.

Leaving

by Sheri Park

Great-grandmother,
you crossed the ocean
and married a stranger
spent your twenties sweating
in pineapple fields, all for
Jesus. You could worship him
here, free, in America.

Your grandchildren remain.
But your great-grandchildren are leaving
that God. Ghosts,
we speak of *han* and horoscopes,
and read postcolonial feminist theology.

Great-grandmother,
would you worry for our souls or
would you understand?
After all, the pastor didn't like it
but you had your daughter keep
Korean superstitions:
never placing a hat on the bed,
never sweeping dust
out the door
(it would sweep away her fortune).

Years after you died, your daughter said
sure, you left Korea for God,
but also for love of your earthly father,
who wanted freedom for you,
and most of all for the sensation
of stepping off that ship, breathing out
the air of home, breathing
in what might become your own paradise.

Daughters like that will lead or will leave.
Daughters like that risk hell and cross seas.

within you

evangelism
emboldened me
to pick up my crimson tray
leave a table full of friends
and ask the boy from japanese 101
if i could join him for lunch
i was jittery with questions
where he grew up (new york)
what was his major (math)
what was his spiritual background
(laughter. have you heard
of reverend moon?)

he knew how to be quiet
how to chew slowly
to mull it over
after a time
i remembered:
how to hold a
thought up
to the light
just as the tree
lifts a flaming leaf
to the autumn wind
holds it
lets it go

*

my roommate's mom
took us to salvation army
for you needed

a thick coat
and thick mittens
to gird
your thin fingers
which you would stretch
like magic
bounding over
the white plains
the black hills
chasing some ghost
while the snow
drifted
soft
below

*

one high school summer
they took you to
the forests of korea.
green leaves
bird calls
marble pillars
the bell called
you raised your hand in a fist
and hit yourself
hard for three hours
three times a day
to beat the devil out
you tell me now
and laugh though
you were proud then
you were serving god
you were doing good

*

these days
we text about
christian anarchism
tolstoy's pacifism
remember how
i'd ask you to lie
by the garden
under patio tables
so dots of sun and shadow
sprinkled your face?

behind you
tulips forced their way
through the earth
to arrive at pink, yellow, gold.

in the darkroom
under red light
i sway the tray

chemicals wash
over paper
exposing your gaze
full moons
half moons
water falls on your face
the kingdom of god
is within you

Commuter

by *Sheila Black*

Silence becomes longing,
Not pure enough, I say as if examining
a glass of tap water in sunlight
to study the dust that floats in it.

Something is beeping in the other room; I am
assuming harmless. White noise
is not oceans, but think of the vehicles,
the people inside appearing to float
as they glide past trees they barely see.

The long commute is between one silence
and another, inflected by wind, voices.

Where will the cup of forgetting begin inside me?

I go into the woods and deeper.
Trees rustle, murmur, frottage of air and, sometimes,
water. I was once of them. I was once
not and will be again forever.

The word "Amen" confuses me,
defined by Merriam-Webster
as "interjection." "Used to express agreement
or at the end of a prayer." Silence is something
else entirely. Here is the water closing
over. Here is the lake and what lies
at the bottom.

Contributors

Devon Balwit's poems can be found in *The Worcester Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Rattle*, *Apt* (long-form issue), *Tar River Poetry*, *Sugar House Review*, *Poetry South*, *saltfront*, and *Grist*, among others. For more, see her website at: <https://pelapdx.wixsite.com/devonbalwitpoet>

Jess Bennett is a recent graduate of MTSU and a refugee from Mars. His hobbies include reading, writing, and howling at the moon. In light of the pandemic, he has switched from being an English teacher to being a caregiver in an assisted living home. His favorite writers include (but are not limited to) Alice Walker, Samuel R. Delany, Elaine Pagels, and whoever the hell wrote the *Nag Hammadi*.

Sheila Black is the author of four poetry collections, most recently *Iron, Ardent* (Educe Press, 2017). She is a co-editor of *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2011). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Birmingham Review*, *The New York Times*, and other places. She currently divides her time between San Antonio, Texas, and Washington, D.C., where she works at AWP.

Allison Boyd Justus is the author of *Solstice to Solstice to Solstice: A Year of Sunrises in Poetry* (Alternating Current Press, 2017). An MFA student in Iowa State University's program for Creative Writing and Environment, Boyd Justus brings to her poetry interests in ecology, feminism, mysticism, and theology. She holds a master of arts in New Testament Studies from Freed-Hardeman University. Her poems "Of the Power of the Air" and "Igneous/Shards" were selected as finalists for the 2019 Rita Dove Prize in Poetry. Her poetry has also appeared in *Lyrical Iowa*, *Penwood Review*, *Madcap Review*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, and elsewhere.

R. C. deWinter's poetry is anthologized in *Uno: A Poetry Anthology* (Verian Thomas, 2002), *New York City Haiku* (New York Times readers, 2017), *Cowboys & Cocktails: Poetry from the True Grit Saloon* (Brick Street Poetry, April 2019), *Coffin Bell TWO* (April 2020), *Nature In The Now* (Tiny Seed Press, August 2019), in print in *2River*, *Adelaide Magazine*, *Gravitas*, *Genre Urban Arts*, *In Parentheses*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Meat For Tea: The Valley Review*, *Night Picnic Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Southword*, among many others, and appears in numerous online literary journals.

K. Shawn Edgar lives in Oregon. Since Edgar received a renal transplantation from the galactic Oregon Health and Science University nephrology wizards, the greater Portland metropolitan area is Edgar's ever-present Mother Ship. Bicycles, soluble fiber, and poetry transfusions are ongoing.

Monica Fields is a poet and writer living in a Southern Appalachian railroad town. A 2011 graduate of the University of Oregon's MFA Program in Poetry, she has taught multi-genre creative writing workshops at Chattanooga State Community College, The Meacham Writers' Workshop at the University of Tennessee (Chattanooga), as well as for private salons. Her work has appeared in *Poems & Plays*, *Poets & Artists*, and *Eyedrum Periodically*.

Hugh Findlay lives in Durham, North Carolina, and would rather be caught fishing. He drives a little red MG, throws darts on Thursdays, reads and writes a lot, dabbles in photography, and makes a pretty good gumbo. His work has most recently been published in *The Dominion Review*, *Literary Accents*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Bangalore Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Wanderlust*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Souvenirs*, *Dream Noir*, *PROEM*, *San Pedro River Review*, *New Southern Fugitives*, and Arachne Press. (@hughmanfindlay)

Madeleine Gebacz is currently based in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and is a recent graduate of the MTSU Write program. She has previously been published in the online literary journal *Cleaning Up Glitter*.

J. W. Heacock, a longtime attorney and veteran of two combat tours in Iraq, retired from the military, earned a master's degree in English at Belmont University, and left the practice of law to write full time. JW has been published in *The Esthetic Apostle*, *Kestrel*, and the *Fredericksburg Literary and Arts Review*. He was a finalist for the Iowa Review Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award. J. W. has also presented stories as part of the Tenx9 Storytelling series, been a featured poet at Nashville's Lyrical Brew, and was the featured writer at East Side Storytelling and its accompanying podcast. Most recently, Heacock was National Parks Arts Foundation Artist-in-Residence at Gettysburg National Military Park in October 2019, where he began writing *Freeing Gettysburg's Ghosts*, a combination of short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry addressing the legacy and mythology of slavery and war.

Kristina Heflin is the author of the chapbook *iridescent rubble*, now available on Amazon. She has served on the editorial board of the literary journal *Flumes* and been published in journals such as *Canyon Voices*, *Fearsome Critters*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Coffin Bell*, and *Broad River Review* among many others. When she's not writing, she enjoys riding her horse, Lucero, and hiking with her Carolina Dog, Jessie. Visit her at www.sagasandmythos.wordpress.com, on Facebook @klheflin, and Twitter @KristinaHeflin.

Heather Hickox is a writer living in Nashville, Tennessee. She is mother to a wonderful daughter, Hannah. Hickox is a graduate of MTSU, with several publications of both poetry and short fiction in *Kaleidoscope: Turns of Prose and Poetry*, *40 Days Around the World: a Digital Arts Festival*, and MTSU's *Collage: A Journal of Creative Expression*. Heather is currently working on her first chapbook, *Mitochondrial Eve*.

Michael Jasper teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Elizabeth City State University in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. He studied creative writing under James Dickey, Keen Butterworth, and William Price Fox at the University of South Carolina. Jasper has lived all over the world: Turkey, Dubai, Jordan, Japan, and Korea. Jasper has published in *The Running Wild Anthology of Stories, Volume 4* and *The Tusculum Review*. His first novel, *Dying Animals*, has been accepted for publication by J.New Books.

Melody C. Johnson received her BA in Creative Writing from Bowie State University. Her work has been published in *The Torch*, *Field Notes: Interpretations of Nature, Volume 1*, and *The Ear*, and in the Fall 2019 edition of *Adanna Journal*. She currently works as an online content editor at a publishing company that produces resources for early childhood educators.

Martin Krafft is currently a graduate student in photography, video, and imaging at the University of Arizona. He received his undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and Economics at Emory University. He hails from the sweet-tea-drinking part of rural Southern Maryland. His jobs have been many and mostly financially unrewarding: ranch hand, handyman, community organizer, preschool teacher, and video editor for an artist with dementia. His art and writing practice revolves around people's search for meaning.

Greg Maddigan lives in Spokane, Washington. He is the author of the chapbook of poems *Paddling Through the Meridian's Wake* (Finishing Line Press). Greg's poetry has also appeared in *The Legendary*, *The Tipton Poetry Journal*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Panophyzine*, *The Grey Sparrow Journal*, and *The Tule Review*. His work is also forthcoming in the *2 Bridges Review*.

John C. Mamone has work in/forthcoming in *Adanna Journal*, *Anacua Literary Arts Journal*, *Number One*, *Artemis*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, and others. He won a Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature (2017) and served as the celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). He's a retired professor of physics living near Knoxville, Tennessee. Find his work at <http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>.

Carolyn Martin has gone from associate professor of English to management trainer to retiree. She has published poems in journals throughout North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Her fourth collection, *A Penchant for Masquerades*, was released by Unsolicited Press in 2019. She is currently the poetry editor of *Kosmos Quarterly: Journal for Global Transformation*. Find out more about Martin at www.carolynmartinpoet.com.

Dr. Sam Matteson, Professor Emeritus, is a man of science and a man of faith. All of his long life, much of it spent in the deep South, he has existentially grappled with the dichotomy of his skeptical nature and his metaphysical—some would say even mystical—outlook. He calls himself “a Christ-follower,” a convinced believer, who, however, has a deep respect and affection for fellow truth-seekers of other faith traditions (or of no faith). As he attempts to help others on the way he has found that he often learns as much from them in the process. His efforts to serve at the interface between faith and science have been recognized by designation as a Fellow of the American Scientific Affiliation, a North American association of spiritually motivated scientists. He was also awarded the Nilson prize from Faculty Commons for his frequent written online motivational essays to faculty exhorting them to serve “as unto the Lord.” He remarked recently that his is a “subversive gospel,” intended to challenge—within and without the ecclesiastical establishment—cultural expectations of the good news. In his essay, based on an actual experience, the teenage Matteson examines an unfortunate characteristic of the “church people.” He was a contributor to Volume 2 of *SHIFT* in the category of creative nonfiction. The piece published in this volume is extracted from a work in progress: *All Day Singing and Dinner on the Grounds*.

Matthew Miller teaches social studies, swings tennis rackets, and writes poetry—all hoping to create a home. He pretends his classroom is a living room, filling it with as many garage-sale chairs as he can afford. He lives beside a dilapidating apple orchard and tries to shape the dead trees into playhouses for his four boys. He vacillates between wanting to poison and wanting to feed the groundhogs, rabbits, and cardinals that try to make their homes in the garden. For now, they've all chosen peace. His poetry has been published in *Flying Island*, *PAN-O-PLY*, and *Your Daily Poem*, and is forthcoming in *Mothers Always Write*.

Dennis Nau has had over a dozen short stories published in literary magazines. These include *Oeuvre*, *Big Muddy*, *Heartlands*, *Aethion*, *Arable*, *Paper Darts*, *Trustmuse*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. His short story was featured in *Adelaide's Best Short Stories of 2017*. One of his stories was adapted into a radio drama.

Sheri Park writes poetry in between exhibitions and as part of her interdisciplinary visual art. Sheri completed her Certificate in Theology and Art from Fuller Seminary in 2015, and is currently pursuing an MFA in Visual Art at San Francisco State University. She lives in San Francisco with her spouse, Peter, and her dog, Hisone.

Debbi Pless has been published in *Kindred*, *Voices of Eve*, and *Quiet*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2018. She currently lives on an island just off the coast of Massachusetts.

Forrest Rapter is the winner of a University Poetry Prize awarded by the Academy of American Poets. His work has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Texas Poetry Review*, *The Boiler*, and *Portland Review*, among others. He is currently a lecturer in the English Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

B. S. Roberts, when not indulging himself by reading or writing poetry and prose, makes a living as a museum curator and an administrative assistant at the University of Maine at Augusta. He also tends to be working on his degree in Ethnography and Folklore. Roberts lives in Maine with his fiancée, daughter, silver pheasants, turtle, and four cats. Find more of his work at www.bsroberts.com.

C. M. Sanderson was born and raised in the Bay Area of Northern California where he spent most of his youth drawing, camping, skateboarding and exploring the world of California. After relocating to Southwest Missouri, Sanderson was encouraged by a college professor to pursue a passion for writing. Sanderson studied English and Creative Writing at Ozarks Technical Community College and Missouri State University. Sanderson can be found enjoying a cold brew coffee at a local coffee shop, working on his next project, or on the pitch playing soccer with his friends.

Christopher Carter Sanderson's latest book is the prose-poetry novel *The Too-Brief Chronicle of Judah Love* from Sagging Meniscus Press. His scholarly book, *Gorilla Theatre*, is published by Routledge. He has translated and adapted Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as *UBU IS KING!* for production in New York City and around the world, and it is published by Accolades Arts Press. His original poetry appears in recent issues of *Gravitas Poetry*, *Poetry City*, *Poets Choice*, and others, and is anthologized in the current *Show Us Your Papers—Main Street Rag*. His translation/adaptation into English blank verse of *The Beatitudes* of the Bible was also first published in *Lunch Ticket Magazine*. He has a BFA from New York University, an MFA from Yale University, and is a Fulbright alumni. He currently teaches at the Downtown Writer's Center in Syracuse and is a member of the Dramatists Guild. He is also a member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Liverpool, New York, and attends Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji.

The Buddha, a title conferred on a prince named Siddhārtha Gautama, was the first human to utilize meditation in order to self-reveal the truth of the universe. The Buddha then became a monk in order to spread the realization of the co-arising of wisdom and meditation. Those who first emulated The Buddha's example collected these, his earliest sayings.

Gerard Sarnat won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for a handful of recent Pushcart Prizes, plus Best of the Net Awards. Sarnat is widely published in academic-related journals (e.g., University Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Pomona, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, University of San Francisco) plus national (e.g., *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *MiPOesias*, *American Journal Of Poetry*, *Clementine*, *pamplemousse*, *Deluge*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Hypnopomp*, *Free State Review*, *Poetry Circle*, *Poets And War*, *Wordpeace*, *Literature*, *Qommunicate*, *Indolent Books*, *Pandemonium Press*, *Texas Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review* and *The New York Times*) and international publications (e.g., *Review Berlin*, *Foreign Lit*, *New Ulster*). He's authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014), and *Melting the Ice King* (2016). Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy and resources to deal with global warming. He's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to future granddaughters.

Jeff Schiff, in addition to writing *That hum to go by* (Mammoth Books, 2012), is the author of *Mixed Diction*, *Burro Heart*, *The Rats of Patzcuaro*, *The Homily of Infinitude*, and *Anywhere in this Country*. His work has appeared internationally in more than a hundred publications, including *The Alembic*, *Grand Street*, *The Ohio Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *Tulane Review*, *Tampa Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Tendril*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Carolina Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *River City (The Pinch)*, *Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *The Southwest Review*. He is currently serving as the interim dean of the school of graduate studies at Columbia College Chicago, where he has been on faculty since 1987.

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who resides with his family in California. A graduate of University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Stephens's recent credits include: *Gyroscope Review*, *2River*, *Gravitas*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Raw Art Review*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Sky Island Journal*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*.

Kimberly Vargas Agnese is a Messianic poet who typically writes for secular publications. Her work has appeared in *Rappahannock Review*, *The Seventh Wave*, and *Awakened Voices*, among others. To read more of her work, visit www.bucketsonabarefootbeach.com.

Angel Warwick is a poet living on the South coast of England, who has been published in *Chaleur Magazine & The Havik Anthology*, with work forthcoming in *The Time & Tide Anthology* from Arachne Press, as well as Riza Press's multimedia *Poetry & Art Journal*.

William Watkins's short stories have appeared in various publications such as *Forge Journal*, *The Moon Magazine*, *Foliage Oak*, *The Opening Line*, *The Bangalore Review*, and *The Corner Club Press*. In the nonfiction realm, he has three books: *Reclaiming the American Revolution* (Palgrave 2004), *Judicial Monarchs* (McFarland 2012), and *Patent Trolls* (Independent Institute 2014). His articles have appeared in various publications, including *USA Today*, *The Washington Times*, and *Forbes*. In his day job, he is an assistant U.S. attorney prosecuting white-collar crime.

Matthew Watson is a multidisciplinary artist and BFA candidate at Southern Oregon University. He has edited for two campus literary magazines and has upcoming work in *PROEM* and *Main Squeeze*. His latest works explore the psychological pressure on workers during the coronavirus quarantine.

Dr. James B. Wells is a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the School of Justice Studies in the College of Justice & Safety at Eastern Kentucky University. He has an AA, BA, and MS in Criminal Justice, as well as a PhD in Research, Measurement, and Statistics. In addition to having over forty peer-reviewed publications in areas related to adult corrections and juvenile justice, he has authored or co-authored multiple books and over 150 research reports for various local, state, and federal agencies. As a result of learning that the circumstances of his father's 1965 death in Vietnam are still classified, Dr. Wells has been on a quest to learn about the father he never got a chance to know, to recreate certain events in his life, to discover the truth about his death, to attempt to find peace for him and his family, and to write about it. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at ECU's Bluegrass Writing Studio. Recent essays from excerpts in his in-progress memoir appear or are forthcoming in *Collateral Journal*, *About Place Journal*, and *Alternating Current Press*. His work has also recently been nominated for the Charter Oak Award for Best Historical.

