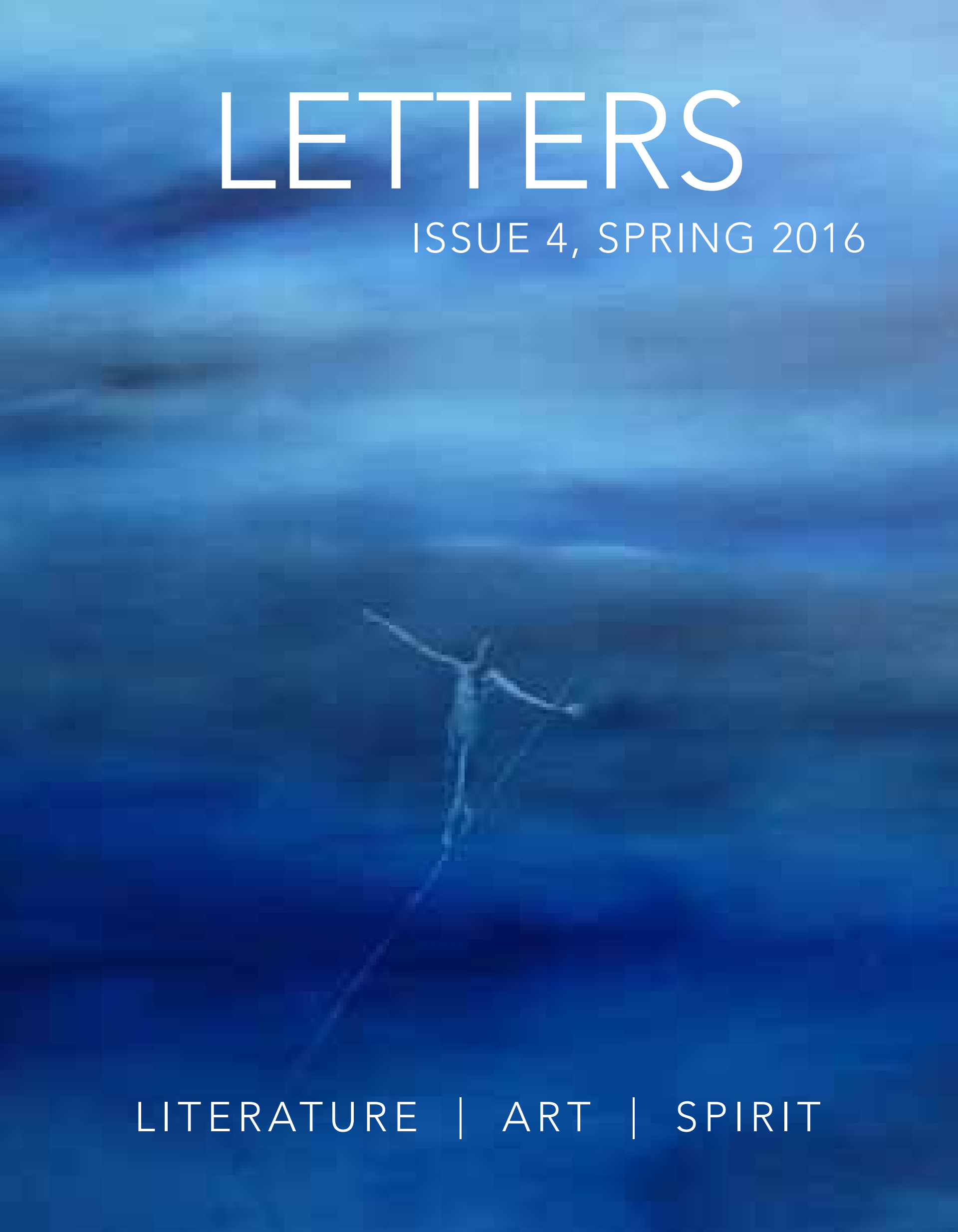
LETTERS

ISSUE 4, SPRING 2016



LITERATURE | ART | SPIRIT

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Cover: Claire Beynon, *Balancing on Air is No Easy Task*, oil on paper, 2016

FROM THE EDITOR

When Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh was fifty years old, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and underwent surgery for the removal of a diseased lung. Kavanagh was admired internationally for his books of poems, but in Dublin he had squandered his goodwill by publishing a critical review called *Kavanagh's Weekly*, where he routinely satirized and belittled Dublin's literary elite. In the months prior to entering the hospital, Kavanagh was publicly discredited by losing a lawsuit against an Irish newspaper that had printed a satirical feature of him not unlike those he imposed on others. His publication failed, and his reputation and self-esteem destroyed. The cancer looked like a fatal blow. Against all predictions, the poet survived the ordeal, and far from being broken by his misfortunes, experienced a rebirth of his art and faith.

"Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal / pouring redemption for me, that I do / the will of God," he wrote in "Canal Bank Walk," among the first poems to emerge after his illness. Kavanagh's near-death experience awakened in him a tenacious humility and love of God. "Give me ad lib," he writes later in the poem, "to pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech."

The cover of this issue of *LETTERS* shows a fragile figure suspended over a boundless blue abyss. "Balancing on air," the painting's title reminds us, "is no easy task." I imagine Kavanagh's soul felt like this while his life was in the hands of the surgeons. Are there any atheists on high wires? "I don't believe in the gods, but they believe in me," remarked Phillipe Petit, the daredevil who balanced his way between the Twin Towers in the 1970s. But watch him at work and you see on his face a stillness somewhere between concentration and divine transport. He is clearly communing up there with something bigger than himself.

The high wire is the ultimate liminal space, a realm of steely self-reliance that is also a bridge of grace. Several of the works in these pages feel very much like they are walking the same fraught strand. Like the cover painting, there are no fixed points, no visible landing places in much of the poetry and prose collected here. This is a familiar existential condition, but in this aggressively secular age it's even more of a gamble for the artist working with spiritual themes, obliquely or overtly. Mainstream creative culture is wary of faith as antithetical to artistic freedom. In today's marketplace of art and ideas, it is no easy task to "pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech." While I don't want to impute on any of the contributors here specific intentions of prayer, devotion, or invocation, you sense in their work an awareness and courage alive to the numinous. I want to suggest that for such artists, whatever the medium, creation is not a matter only of expression, far less *self*-expression; it is as well a knowing act of rapport with the divine.

This is the fourth year of our still-young publication, the fourth issue of an enterprise poised on its own tightrope between desire for literary credibility and loyalty to the values of a divinity education. Chief among these values is not faith per se (as non-divvies so readily assume), but consent to faith as a legitimate mode of inquiry and knowledge. This was the tension I affirmed to my fellow student editors whose efforts made this issue a reality, a tension sublimely negotiated by them and by those whose creative work we present to you.

Timothy Cahill

LETTERS JOURNAL
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Contributors

Patrick Angiolillo is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Religion at Yale Divinity School with a concentration in Second Temple Judaism. He will begin a doctorate program in Hebrew Bible in the Fall of 2016.

South African-born Claire Beynon is an artist, poet, and interdisciplinary researcher living in Dunedin, New Zealand. She considers the arts vital in areas of social and environmental advocacy and peace-building. Claire is founder-curator of MANY as ONE, an arts and peace initiative to facilitate on- and offline networks of creative exchange.

Bethany Carlson is an M.Div candidate at Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music. She holds an M.F.A. in poetry writing from Indiana University. Her chapbook *Diadem Me* was published by MIEL Press in 2014.

A Loyola University Chicago alumnus, Michael Carlson is returning to the Chicago area to teach high school after graduation from Yale Divinity School (2016 M.A.R.).

Daniel Collins has been studying poetry for the past five years since leaving the Catholic seminary. His greatest influences have been the poetry of Keats and the philosophy of G.K. Chesterton.

Anna DeForest studies medicine at Columbia University. Her stories have appeared in *Sleepingfish*, *Unsaid*, *Everyday Genius*, and the *Alaska Quarterly Review*.

A poem by Christine Hemp has traveled over 1.7 billion miles on a NASA mission to monitor the birth of stars. She has aired her poems on NPR's Morning Edition and is author of the collection *That Fall* (Finishing Line Press, 2012). Hemp lives on Washington's Olympic Peninsula with her husband and two horses.

Tomashi Jackson is a 2016 Painting and Printmaking M.F.A. candidate at the Yale School of Art. Her work explores the perception of color and the value of human life in public space using the history of school desegregation and contemporary resegregation as a catalyst.

Mark Koyama graduated from Yale Divinity School and the Institute of Sacred Music. He was editor of *LETTERS Journal* from 2013-2015. Mark has a dumb phone and a smart wife. He washes cast-iron skillets with salt and water.

Skye Makaris is a freelance writer living in Vermont. She attended advanced writers' workshops at Champlain College and the University of Vermont, and her work has appeared in *Bustle*, *Elephant Journal*, and the *Prague Revue.*

Megan McDermott is a first-year student at Yale's Institute of Sacred Music, where she is also pursuing a diploma in Anglican Studies. In 2014, Megan graduated from Susquehanna University, where she studied writing and religion. Her poetry has been published in *The Cresset*, *Saint Katherine Review*, and *Dogpond Magazine*.

Ruth Meteer is a 2016 M.A.R. candidate at Yale Divinity School, with a concentration in Literature and Religion. Her poems have appeared in Spirited Magazine, The Watermark, and The Isis, Oxford University's literary journal, which awarded her a prize for her poem, "We Know Not What We Do." Ruth lives in Providence, R. I., where she owns a group shop for vintage clothing dealers.

Natalija Mijatovic is a Serbian-born artist and M.F.A. graduate from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The general theme of her work is landscape, natural or industrial, and her recurrent interest in stillness is defined by the quiet void of human presence. She is currently associate professor and chair of Department of Art and Design, Binghamton University.

Bailey Pickens is scheduled to graduate from Yale Divinity School with a Masters of Divinity in May 2016 and be an ordained Presbyterian minister in a year or so, God willing and the creek don't rise.

Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra's multi-faceted musical resume includes liturgical musician, author, composer, historical keyboardist, pedagogue, improvisateur, and composer. She holds degrees in organ performance pedagogy and choral music education from Dordt College (B.A.) and the University of Iowa (M.F.A. and D.M.A.).

Jon Seals is an artist, teacher, and curator living in Florida. He holds an M.A.R. from Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music and an M.F.A. in Painting from Savannah College of Art and Design.

Wyatt Smith is a recent graduate of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale School of Music, where he studied organ performance with Dr. Martin Jean. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in organ performance at the University of Washington in Seattle, as a student of Dr. Carole Terry.

Natalija Mijatovic, *Aix*, oil on linen, 2010. Photo by Chris Focht

CHRISTINE HEMP

BEYOND ALL THAT

(Gabriel)

I squeeze myself into time. It's tight
like a little coat or a skin I'm much too big for.
I do it, though, because I must. For the light

I bring with me. At first her eyes blink with tears,
her pupils wide, and in them I can see the door
of history: the tree she springs from—the sheer

audacity of that branch growing beyond her womb
into memory, blood, and bone. Before
I raise my hand I cannot help but see a tomb

as well; it's why I'm here: That gyre
of time. Prepositions cannot explain or
identify the where and when, the source of fire

that sent me. It's all a gift, and what I bring
has no relation to being good, that poor
imitation of love. Trumpets, halos, or even wings

are not my story, though there are those who
tell the old, worn tale: Me poised on a marble floor
offering the white lily I am said to carry through

the corridors of temples, Italian paintings.
But she sees beyond all that. At her core
she's at home within her flesh, sustaining

calm when the spark ignites. She holds her belly,
opens her mouth. I tell her something more
about the seed, the fruit. All she does is stare at me.

In our brief exchange, I taste her fear,
but she doesn't flinch. Yes, she says. (Lord,
how much joy and sorrow can a human bear?)

YES

(Mary)

so my heart began to rappity-pat. oh oh oh like how I always imagined
making love might be
then a sudden flush of birds and the olive trees outside my window
rattled in the wind.
I rose but did not see
a thing then a wing
I thought it was a lark
but then it was as if I was looking dead
into the sun

we never talked out loud (we didn't have to) he read
my thoughts
he knew my heart's confusion
in our private bubble every feeling every question every word
bounced off the curve inside

my life went from dreaming about life
to living it
no more wondering about the secret crevices those dark places
where love comes home the song I'd sung that morning
had shifted keys I was no longer
a girl
the man I'm supposed to marry I hardly know, but even he

is wary of the weight I carry he steps around the mule and helps me off
when I get tired I know he's afraid to touch me
I'm giving in
to what that wing
told me I would do Sometimes now at night
when the crickets call I feel the kick
of something
fragile and immense my knees begin
to shake and then I breathe and breathe again (in and out in and out)
omygod will everything turn out ok?

EACH CUT-OFF PIECE

(Joseph)

I've always been good at following directions.
House plans, for instance. I can see the shape, make
allowances for framing windows and hanging doors.
I always give the time it takes for good mortar to dry.

The structure of this plan, however, is beyond me.
No hammer or plumb bob will help. So I've packed us up
and we're headed down the road. I have to say I'm glad
to leave. My neighbors whisper behind my back,

"Old Joe! Couldn't wait, could he?" The boys in the shop
turn away as I plane a board, shavings curling
toward the east. And yet— and yet— I agreed
to go ahead. That dream I cannot shake. Now Mary's

shapely breasts are so full and ready I can only blush.
One would not expect to find the holy nestled there!
(Such moist and glowing flesh.) I've never been a visionary
nor someone called to lead. Nor am I a vessel

like this girl whose face could light the sky. I guess
the closest I can get to what I feel is the song of the saw
singing timbers into form. Each cut-off piece
will build a solid story. But I'm worried. All along

the road people have been telling us the rooms are full,
that some are camping out in barns. In my dream
I see my clumsy feet walking down this very road.
Her water breaks with mules and horses standing by.

Tonight we're buying time. While she's asleep my tears
could fill a bowl. It's not sadness exactly or even fear,
but tenderness so huge my eyes ache from what
I cannot see. For if this is true— really true— what then?

WHAT THIS STORY ASKS OF ME

(Joseph, again)

By the twelfth day I'd sorted out the census and fixed the door
on the rented house. Mary was tired after all the moving, the bags
under her eyes eclipsed only by her smile. She saw things I could not.
I was still trying to pick apart last night's dream when foreign

travelers knocked. They rode sleek Arabian mares with nostrils
pink as desert flowers. Camels carried boxes for my boy –
well, not exactly mine, but mine to tend. Mary seemed to be expecting
them. She lifted her young face, shushed the child. "Come," she said.

The men, smelling of balsam, cinnamon, and cloves, spoke softly
till the baby woke, then things got quiet. I offered tea and we accepted
gifts: essential oils and nuggets of the finest gold. We knew we'd have to
hide it all, but thanked them all the same. Finally I staggered off to bed,

the muffled voices rising and falling in the night. I couldn't sleep.
With every utterance of praise, I could hear its opposite. The shaft of light
which brought the sages stabbed my belly, as if the pain of birth were asked
of men as well as women. I dread what this story asks of me. Of him.

SCATTERING VIPERS

(John the Baptist)

It seemed fitting, my wearing the prophesy. People touched
my itchy robe, hoping it would honey them over the suffering

stones. I liked the desert. It laid everything bare—
even my own misgivings. Finally I retreated to a cave.

The walls murmured, and when I finally stepped out, the twisted
trail was straight. Then voices— crowds had trekked

for miles to find me. I led them to the river which offered up
its coolness and begged to be married with fire, so I broke

the water with my cup and poured it over head after bowed head,
shouting out imperatives. That fat, sleepy river kept me sane: Now

is all we have, it said. But I knew all that. I was good at waving
my arms, scattering vipers like a cloud of locusts. People listened.

The scary part came later when my words and gestures ignited
a different flame; it scorched my sandals. I feel it now in my head.

I was not prepared for this prison and hearing second-hand
about the lame and lepers. It's not "Why me? but "Why him?"

MEGAN MCDERMOTT

CONCERNING HER KILLING OF SISERA

Crescendo of chirping. Birds descend on discarded wheel.

A spider bite on her upper thigh. She presses
into red bump with nail, laughs as it breaks open.

Kneeling woman with a spoon
scoops up cracked ground, grunting
and quaking like a mother during birth.

Two children bathe in the river.
Younger scrambles towards older,
grabs onto his head, bears down,
marvels at the loss of breath.

The man and wife are naked when she bites his neck
so hard his head detaches from his body.
He blinks while she toys with the strings
that had held him together, twines veins
around her wrists like bracelets.

Two hungry oxen live together in the last days
and coax each other to sleep with stomach rumble lullabies.
One day the smaller ox notices its growl is louder,
so it gores its other, the only other, only breathing being
in miles or maybe all of earth. Horns catch on organs.
There is feasting.

I flinch no more than a man.

Tomashi Jackson, *Untitled I*, mixed media, 2010

PATRICK ANGIOLILLO

AN UNPROVENANCED PSALM

[1]Happy is she who in her strength cannot be bowed down,
who does not prostrate herself before gods,
[2]for she stands in the midst of the ones who ridicule her
and she revokes their ransom claim,[a]
the ones who humbled her she does not fear;
[3]she enters the house of God, she removes his images;
she treads on his likeness, and she goes out like a divinity;
[4]they cry out to their gods, "save us,"
but his ears she closes with clay,
he will not deliver them in their distress;
[5]she lifts up her face to wisdom forever,
and righteousness is with her the length of her days;
[6]She will surely grow great among the nations,
every people will ascribe to her glory and honor,
they will prostrate before her on account of her might.

[a]meaning of word uncertain

I. Where Do I Go

to make a wish
when wells are dry
and fountains fail
to fill their basins?

II. To The Desert

since the wells were never full
since someone forgot to turn on the fountains in the first place

DANIEL COLLINS

DAUGHTER OF EDEN

Daughter of God, live not to cry.
You breathe the air of Paradise,
You know not what it means to die,
And I see Eden in your eyes.

Daughter of Job, beware the night,
For you shall pass the Garden's wall,
And waiting for you, out of sight,
Is evil where the shadows fall.

Daughter of God, the dawn shall break,
The shadows fly before the sun.
And you shall live for mercy's sake,
Despite what terror has been done.

Daughter of Job, the Sun will see
The secret sin to which you cling.
Then who shall say what you shall be
When darkness is your everything?

Daughter of God, the Lamb was slain
And spent His life to cleanse the Earth.
Made spotless in His Blood, you gain
The Eden of a second birth.

Daughter of Job, the road is long
From Golgotha to Heaven's gate.
Your lonely feet shall soon go wrong
And lead you to a darker fate.

Daughter of God, the path is clear,
And many walk the way with you.
Remember in your darkest fear
The Blood will mark what path is true.

Daughter of Job, you will forget
This Garden where you lay your head.
And in its place your mind will set
An image of the faceless dead.

Daughter of God, this place shall fade,
And all shall seem a bitter vale.
But in the lasting home He made,
Your Paradise will never fail.

Daughter of Job, His home is fair,
And joy shall last across His lands.
But shadows linger even there,
Behold His side, and touch His hands.

MARK KOYAMA

THE BACKYARD IN SPRING

(*for Lois*)

After services, Sunday last, we sowed a row
of peas along the fence line—pale green, they rolled
from an old seed pack I bought a decade back
when the children were still young and we'd only just
moved to Greenfield Road. We covered the seeds
with an inch of loam and sprinkled them with wood ash,
Cary, kneeling in April dirt to give her brusque blessing,
"Germinate!" adding, as to elderly acquaintances:
"you old seeds!" Now, on Tuesday, I stand at the window
watching the rain give our peas their first good soaking.
The calendar on my computer chimes, and a pop-up
tells me "mom died on this day." A string of gems
falls from the eves—a whisper of water in the act
of becoming a puddle. Some house sparrows
and a pair of winter goldfinches dart in from
the branches of the lilac, vying for turns
at the feeder. How long has it been now?
Already five years.

A NEIGHBOR'S DEATH

Our neighbor came by to tell us that her brother
died on Monday. She stood in the kitchen door,
unwilling to come in, her smile tightening against
the effort of making it okay. "It is what it is,"
she said. I put the cast-iron skillet back in the sink.
I wanted to say *no, it isn't*. But apparently that's what
her brother had told her, grimacing as he grabbed at
the rubber handgrips of the walker to pull himself up
off the edge of the bed. "It is what it is," he said.
He had to use the bathroom one last time. The nurse said
insurance would cover the cost of a nice hospital bed
and a recliner too, if he wanted it, but he said no, I don't
want that. Why drag it out? His feet were swollen
and weird-looking like fruit. The rest of him had gone
all thin. His breath was stalling out. So he closed his eyes.
Lit up a smoke. Hopped on his flea-market ten-speed
and wove his way down Montague City Road
past the Cumby's and out into the long
lazy summer afternoon.

Tomashi Jackson, *Untitled II*, mixed media, 2010

RUTH METEER

PSALM OF SUPPLICATION

Lord, let my heart be
hardened. Good

God, let my heart be hardened. Give me rock,

paper, scissors, and a pen.
I would create flat smiling dolls, holding hands
and weight their simplicity to the table.

Father, pharaoh me, make me indifferent to the plague
of the indifference of man.

Turn me to a pillar of salt. I'll stand
deserted in the sands. Halt me,
ossify this vice, my one last empathetic glance,

concrete this heart against the hurt of human hardness' advance.

Make me in your likeness, to be hard
is not to be inhuman. This throbbing ripe tomato

is a bruised foolishness, at best
to be but diced, then stewed, then canned.

I've known the sundried sundries
known as human hearts and hands.
Hardened, Holy

Spirit, won't you
let my heart be. Good

God, let my heart be
hardened.

WYATT SMITH

BETHANY CARLSON

PAMELA
RUIER-FEENSTRA

JON SEALS

LITURGY LIVE!

The genesis of *Liturgy LIVE!* came out of a conversation that I had with organist and composer, Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra. I approached her with the idea of commissioning a set of six works for solo organ that would feature different historic Lutheran chorales, embodying each of the six seasons of the Liturgical year. She graciously accepted this project, which spanned several years of composition (2012-2015). Collaborating with Pamela, I selected the Lutheran chorale on which each piece was to be based, along with a suggestion of the style in which each piece could be composed. She in turn took many of my recommendations, adding aspects of different musical languages and world traditions. I premiered these six works in a performance at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin at the end of April 2015.

The opportunity to expand *Liturgy LIVE!* into the realms of artwork and the spoken word came near the time that I premiered the collection. Having performed these works solely in the context of a concert, and not within a liturgy, brought forth a narrative that could be expanded in other mediums. I approached two friends—graduate students at the Yale Divinity School and colleagues of mine at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music—artist Jon Seals (MAR '15) and poet Bethany Carlson (MDiv '16). Jon created oil paintings based on each organ work, after which Bethany wrote meditations for each season of the liturgical year to draw together the musical and visual elements. Both were enthusiastic about being part of the collaboration, forming a triad of three primary forms of artistic expression: music, visual art, and spoken word.

We are pleased to present the fruits of our efforts here in *LETTERS*. Obviously, viewing the work in this form strips it of its central performative feature, but one can see nonetheless the divergence of interpretation each artist brought to the project, and sense the convergence as we brought them together. Recordings of Pamela's compositions performed by myself are available on Sound Cloud (https://soundcloud.com/wyatt-smith-8/liturgy-live-by-pamela-ruiter-feenstra).

Though this project grew first from the traditions of German Lutheranism, the addition of the spoken and visual components creates multiple access points through which the faithful of different traditions and sensibilities may enter into the liturgical year, joining Christ in his birth, life, suffering, and resurrection. Thus Luke's words on Pentecost Day:

> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:5-8 ESV).

—Wyatt Smith
Spring 2016

I

ADVENT

Behold the valley
edged in lilac glory;

pleasure of angels & prophets,
of stars dim with myth.

Behold a kingdom, unhushable,
haloed in awe. Lower, lower,

he was made; conjuring cloud
until he was one of us, a burst

of reedy notes clinging
to his hair. Behold his outstretched

arms in unison; his face upturned
as if a body so tender, so lovely

could secure our purest blessing.

II

CHRISTMAS

Joy in the cross-

hatched pattern

of straw, the interior

of rough-hewn mangers;

joy in the fragrance

of frankincense; the cinema

of myrrh. Joy in the faces

of animals feeble with use;

joy in the rhythm

of stable candles; joy

in the days since

when we find ourselves

at the edges of serifs, each jot

and tittle a silhouette

of milksweet breath.

III

EPIPHANY

We reach because we seek—
muscles taut with the fraying
tension of want and lack.

Deer idle by the frozen lake,
charged with apparitions of joy
that so often elude majesty. Take this

…the new and everlasting covenant…
blood…shed for you lingering
on branches gleaming

against midday sun. Still the light
shines us forward, emblem beyond
these sovereign moments

when he lingers at the center
of our heaven, bearing as he did
the nails, the crown, the spear—

our threadbare humanness
in finger-splayed wonder, the church
his body our offering.

IV

LENT

Alleluia, night cools

against his ribboned
body, broken for you;

Alleluia, stain of sin,

grain of wood, bloodied & gold—
taste it, metallic, shed for you;

Alleluia, spears and spires

could not cross the iron-wrought
majesty of morning star;

Alleluia, our anthem soars

banner in the last glaze
of summer sun;

Alleluia, loneliness
empties, crest of black

on a monarch's wing.

V

EASTER

After rain
the trees bled
quietly pastelly

Golgotha afterhours
watercolors pearled
became animate

rainbead stained
blackened by bloodcrust
slackened by bloodlust

a body in its last
phase of crucifix:
tender sun cropped

by tender son.

VI

PENTECOST

Bread of heaven
& nature sing,
holy the sapphire
peeled back.

Soothed in myrrh,
withdrawing breath

from the valley's nape. Somewhere cloudlift & oranges

rotting sweetly on desert floors.
Pray the flame engulfs us. Pray
the blue host of it
will not be lost on us, pray

that even as the son kneels, bathed

in the last hourglass of evening,
the light of the kingdom unspooling
will propel us forward
a mighty rush of wind.

ANNA DEFOREST

ALL WE ARE STEALING

It's a summer night, a great hot walk-around-drinking night, when Dal gets in that mood again to take off all his clothes. I try to talk him down, but some blocks out from the house I let him drop his shirt and shoes, and as we round the last corner I say, If it must be done, and he undoes his belt and steps from the legs of his pants as through a threshold. It's a transfiguration, him walking up that concrete block in the yellow haze of streetlight just shy of dawn, bare as he was born. And then, you know, we just get home, no event or scandal. We curl up together like a pair of kids and sleep.

I don't think I know a lot. I get dark sometimes in my thoughts, too beat down and shored up to even make a meal. When it heads that way, and I want to cry or scream, I always think without meaning to about how in Somalia or someplace there's whole armies made of children, doped-up kidnapped children who each was held at machete point and made to chop up his own family. So what do I have to be sad about? Dal will ask me that some nights, or he won't, but his eyes get sort of thick with it. Here we are, for example, in a miracle town where once a week at least in summer you can find an upright establishment serving oysters a dollar each. So he and I are eating oysters, he and I from all the dirt we come from are sitting in a surroundings of shined wood and rich red leather, putting tiny forks of horseradish into the very shells of oysters, beers at the ready, whiskey to come, veritable princes, you might say, among men. But sometimes I don't know what I drink for at all, because there's some glamour there like in a film I guess, but I do mostly tend to end up crying over my glass, and Dal gets that look, that Somalian look about him, and I halfway want to get straight for good and find myself a job at a bank.

Dal himself is haunted, which is why we hit it off. This was so long ago it's hard to remember, like trying to recall before you could speak or tie your shoes, a time your world was so stupid and small you feel sick in your stomach if you really try to call it up. What's wrong with Dal is that despite him having had a mediocre and shame-faced upbringing, especially with respect to the kings we live like now, he can't stand to wear shoes sometimes when so many folks are shoeless, and it takes about all I've got to get him out for oysters when even this miracle town is scattered block by block by dirty bodies actually starving for a bite of bread. I starved some once, or close enough, when I was a kid, which I guess is how I got Dal to understand, and now we go out like a sacrament, eat our oysters like any king might, though that might be why he walks home like this, naked and barefoot on the glass-sparkled sidewalk.

In this town we walk everywhere we go, and there are some hours and roads which are

Claire Beynon, *Walk with me?*, Oil on Paper, 2016

filled with people asking. I do as Dal taught me, which is to give what cash I have at hand, but I find myself planning on not having much in advance. Dal taught me also to always ask a person's name, to offer a hand to shake, to sit a while if that seems warranted and listen to the sad news of the day. One I hear a lot is a man's got a woman who only ever takes, takes his money, his drugs, and his clothes, takes his cane or his teeth or his shoes, things she doesn't even have a use for. And by now I have listened to so many folks who are on the street and cold tell me how dead they wish they were. On days too cold to cry they'll cry and say they cannot live another day of this, and in spring and summer too they cannot live another day of this, and that much we have in common. Homed as I am, I find most days hard to pass, oysters notwithstanding.

So what? Dal for his job sweeps the floors in a church, and dusts in a monthly rotation all the garnished things adorning the walls and hanging from the ceiling. When he passes the front of the chapel he bows, and kneels in other places out of a reverence I was never schooled in. I come around noon to comb the parish kitchen for open packets of food to throw together for a lunch, since when we have passed through our rich weeks Dal and I go poor for just as long, tightening our belts and swearing over bills we overlooked when we possessed the means to pay them. He swears this is the last time, each last wild night, as though he has the hope to believe that we're on the cusp of leveling out. I feel like a thief when I am in church. Not just because I am stealing.

Off to the side in the front of the chapel is what's called the font, the sort of birdbath where they hold the baptisms. A carved cone hung on a pulley and chain is locked down over the top. This is meant, Dal says, to keep witches out of the holy water. How much of this are we supposed to take? I feel all or nothing, eating saltines in the front pew while Dal, who can't sing, sings a church tune with the words all wrong. God be in my face, God be in my arms. A small, odd man comes in sometimes, as the doors are always open, and Dal besides would never send a person out. This man comes in with a chipped old one-stringed guitar, and when he speaks it's as if someone cut out his tongue. And because the church air feels charged a bit, storied, I always get the sense he'll take a turn, this odd man, sit down some day in the chapel and floor us with what songs he can sing with one string and hardly any tongue. But he never plays that guitar at all. He just follows Dal around for a quarter hour, earnest with a broom or dustcloth, sometimes trying out whispered strings of gibberish but staying mostly silent until Dal gives him a dollar and he goes off to wherever else he goes.

We talk while he works or over our little lunches. Dal's a man I know close to everything about, but he comes to me with small delights, for instance a rotting bird he is protecting in the churchyard garden, so when the meat is gone we can piece back together the bones. But other times he turns up some secret to tell, from before we were together or that he only failed to mention, as the other day when he told me that some years ago he had been walking to or from somewhere in town and found a small bag of some drug lying on the street, and

he not only picked it up but brought it home and used it. I didn't ask him how it was. I'm afraid sometimes to see what all is possible.

When the church is clean and Dal has an arched back and limps from so much time bent over, I get a feeling for him as a man who works, and half an urge to care for him like a housewife. But sometimes just the flurry of thought around cooking a meal wipes me out, so I suggest instead we go to a bar, not the oysters kind, but this one dim place we like for early evening, heavy wood and darker than it should be, cold like only the dark is cold. I like to sit and have Dal tell me stories about the fat old priests riding stationary bicycles side-by-side in the rectory, the wet grand walls crumbling with mold that makes them puff and wheeze. It makes me think of a story of his, about a bike he'd wanted when he was a kid that his father couldn't afford, so this father built another bike for him from garbage scraps painted up like the bike he wanted, a big sad bike that wheezed like a priest when you got on, and Dal had no choice but to take it out and ride it in front of everyone. He laughed when he told me this, sweet father, wrongheaded father, but it struck my heart as the saddest thing I'd ever heard in my life.

By now I am a certain ways drunk, wanting oysters or a rectory, but not wanting to ask for much until at least the end of the week. So I try to keep quiet, and Dal's quiet too, and what starts spinning in my head is this daylong feeling, reaching up at me like the past and all the beggars in this town, the tips of machetes and this long line of life to live through. I worry over what's to come, me and Dal, how I know that we'll always be together, such a strong fact it's like a curse to us on the rare nights we are killing each other. I worry about the children we could have. Because what I want for them, and this is all, is for us to be so rich that they can go about being whatever they want, they can roll in dirt or smoke or use their forks wrong, because they're so rich, they're so rich deep in their bones, it shows on their faces and they can pass off, no matter what they're getting up to.

I sleep like the dead these drinking nights, and wake from dreams of being thirsty. On the way to the sink I find Dal knelt in the hall on a kneeler he stole from the church, praying, for what I can only guess at. And morning comes with not much to shine light on, just him dressing in an old dark suit to head to the church where he'll set up and sit through and take down a funeral. The funerals—I've never been to one. I wouldn't know the right way to dress. But I can imagine one to go to, one where they wear all kinds of clothes, some black sorts of business wools, but florals too, and reds, sports shoes or no shoes, clean or dirty or shirtless. And no one really looks each other over too close. We stay calm in our seats, turning a little, maybe, to take each other's hands, facing forward, waiting politely. The one in the box could be a woman in a pale dress, a suit I guess, like someone's mother would wear to a high-end lunch. And then a long silence before the priest does his speech, long enough for me to think how brave we all are, just for showing up.

SKYE MAKARIS

HE CALLED HIMSELF MESSIAH

"Come to bed," Shoshanna said.

Moonlight quartered her face. Already disposed to worry, she was only sharper for the yellow light splintering her features. I braced for her harshness, but it didn't come. Instead, she bent to share the ground with me.

"Issachar, I pretend I don't know you're out here. I keep to myself when I see you looking so haggard by day. But I can only keep so many secrets."

My words were too long coming. "I haven't asked you to keep any."

"Please. You ask with everything but your voice."

"Maybe the voice is what you should heed."

Shoshanna's lips sharpened—not from moonlight, I knew. "Shut out your only sister, then—if that's really what a messiah would do." I winced at the thorns in her words. No word. Just one. She knew what it was.

I parted my own lips—to exhort, or upbraid, or simply beg—but nothing came. How could I pin down such a wandering ache, confine it to a turn of phrase practical Shoshanna could digest? The truth was more than words. It was shaking hands and weighted lungs and a stark, profound unmooring. In the jaws of such a beast, any word becomes a lie.

The pared-down face of it was, how could I look at Shoshanna as though nothing had changed? As though I was still I? I was at once more and less than yesterday's Issachar. Both diminished and heightened with grief. Why can't you just be grateful you are saved? Shoshanna had half-sobbed, half-begged the night before, when my restlessness had again woken her. I had no answers, only aches.

I opened my lips in the moonlight. "Because..." And there it was, the core announcing itself. "Because, Shoshanna, it should have been me."

In the days after the man they called Christ had ascended, I ate and slept, in no kind of order. I floated. I lived in the distance between what I'd craved and what I now could not bear.

"Come to bed," Shoshanna pleaded. "Come to bed," every night, as though her comfort had shrunk to three words alone. "Come to bed," she called, and I heard the strain of tears. She'd bound up her whole self in the paltry offer. To refuse was to shred her. But this was between me and God.

Chosen. Holiness had been there, glistening for me. Brightest just before the snuffing out. Chosen. It was everything I wasn't.

I hung up my mantle and I tended my sheep. I had Shoshanna turn my callers away. And I decided to live as though I had never played at anything greater than myself. I'd be man and man alone.

But in the fields I couldn't keep my mind to myself. It lit harshly on other times, other Issachars. He was young and new, potential yet unwhittled. Were there rudiments of the future man in those unbidden smiles? He was twelve, and first felt God stroke his still-beardless face. He was twelve, and he knew.

He was fifteen and beginning to feel his truth. The bones that had carried him to manhood were filling now with a different kind of purpose. Beyond subsistence, beyond existing itself. His prayers

dizzied and dazzled him. He was twenty and fervid, passion collecting in those bones he knew to be more than just his. He felt vocation down in the deep where boy becomes man becomes martyr. He was twenty and he was sure.

He sowed his flock slowly, unsteadily, an uphill march to liberation. Shepherds and carpenters and a wretch or two, collecting in sheds and stables to hear the boy preacher. Some still beardless, they saw in Issachar hope under their own humble guise. A promised land in a mortal skin. He kissed their cheeks and vowed to carry them into whatever came next.

He'd asked his God, and his God had answered back. Or something like Him, near in power but crueler. He wasn't sure what had answered him those many nights, but he—I, I, this is me, my mind—I do not wish to know its name.

I am twenty-two and it is all over. He has been Chosen, and He is not me.

What more could these plains bring me? How could I be but man again?

And so I came to bed.

Shoshanna was plaiting her hair in the corner. The sunset shifted upon her; she was far too haggard. Had she grown fond of being the sister of a messiah? Had I broken her alongside myself? I loved my stoic sister, and I hated her for loving me too much.

I fell upon her cot. By instinct, by love, by fear she pulled my head into her lap. And with that, I could no longer swallow it. My throat howled with pain, my hands shook with it, but it was wholly unconnected from me, Issachar, the man. The hurt was its own beast, riding my body into glory.

I clung to my sister Shoshanna and the pain rode both our bodies. I wasn't trying to hurt her when I begged. I was thinking of the ache in my chest, how numb my bones were. I was thinking please let me feel again when I clutched her waist, when she finally whispered assent. Her mouth said yes and the shape of her chin said only for you, only so you can feel. I pushed and rubbed in the frenzy of what I'd lost. I would find paltry salvation in the guise of climax. Flesh was a small prize but a prize nonetheless, and what better than a sister's love to deliver it?

When I dismounted I saw the blood on her thighs. I sought her dark, unreadable face and found damage in its contours. Guilt dampened my pain, tempered it until her sad eyes loomed larger than any holy slight.

"Are you finished?"

"Oh, Shoshanna—" I lay my palms open, beckoning. She shrank from me with a fear I'd never seen. I hated myself.

"Until now," she said—and her voice barely there— "I hadn't stopped thinking you holy."

I came to bed that night, and I'll never come again. I'll wander as far as these corrupted bones might carry me. Shoshanna's blood lives in me now, staining my member and rancid in the back of my throat. I'm drunk on its stink and its reminder. Until now, I hadn't stopped thinking you holy. Until now. Until now.

I am going to Golgotha. To the place where bones crack and joints split with the promise of resurrection. This Messiah claims he's died for my sins. Is it heresy if I choose, instead, to die for my own?

I don't think I care.

I can see him now, the future's Issachar, taking up his final mantle. From beardless dreamer to pubescent preacher to … whatever it is you'd call me now. A defiler. From son to saint to scapegoat. I will kneel where my Messiah once swayed and let the desert bleach my bones. Let it shrink my skin and dry my blood to dust.

Shoshanna, Shoshanna, I'm coming back to bed.

BAILEY PICKENS

ARACHNOPHOBIA

2015 Frederick Buechner Prize in Creative Nonfiction

The Southern house spider (*Kukulcania hibernalis*) is a large, brown spider common throughout Florida and the southern United States, particularly in areas populated by humans. Females have rounded bodies and thicker legs, and can live for seven years if left unmolested. Males have thin bodies, poor eyesight, and short lifespans often further shortened because they resemble the brown recluse. Both have leg spans the size of a child's hand. They are not aggressive spiders, preferring to retreat or play dead when threatened, and their bite is merely an inconvenience, if their mandibles pierce the skin at all. When hit with a broom, their bodies shatter, the touch of the bristles jettisoning all eight legs up and out before body and limbs fall in a dun-colored shower to the floor. That is a mistake I only made once.

The fragility of spider bodies is a curious counterpoint to the psychological power they wield over much of the population. They terrified my sister when we were children. As the oldest, I pretended to be less afraid—perhaps I was less afraid, though the speed with which I dropped the broom after it sent spider bits raining onto the dingy carpet in my sister's room suggests otherwise. But even I fell asleep some nights cradling the fear that there would be a spider on the ceiling when I opened my eyes. I did not think that the ceiling spider would hurt me, exactly; it was enough that it might be there to find, and when I turned on lights in dark rooms I kept my eyes on the carpet. This is the real thrust of the fear of the dark: not that there is something in the dark, but precisely that it will be revealed: that light does not scatter the darkness entirely but rather causes it to condense into a crawling thing that remains to be dealt with. That such shadowy things are not only possible but likely, perhaps ubiquitous. That in all cases it behooves one to keep her eyes down.

I graduated and left the South for the Midwest and found no spiders, but they were easily replaced by the air itself, which seemed always gray and much too close. Chicago's winters produce cloud banks that extend for miles, for months. In an average year, sixty percent of winter days are heavily clouded, another twenty percent partly cloudy. The steady cold and the low angle of the winter sun create very even layers of atmospheric condensation, so that the sky is blank and unrippled, chill and hanging very low. On the rare days when the skies cleared and the city loved me, I would go downtown to absorb the light that poured from the buildings, face angled up like a solar panel, as though my skin could catch and hold the sunlight to protect me when the gray came back. (It could not.) Then the sun would vanish for a week or more while I grew afraid to leave my apartment, then my bed. I thought that the gray sky looked at me as though it knew how I longed for sunshine and would only bring it back if I were good. I was not to forget that it could stay forever if it wanted, that the gray air would wrap itself around my body until I could not feel where I ended and it began. I thought that, as with some wild animals, to make eye contact with the air overhead would be to provoke attack, and I was mindful of my safety. I once forgot myself and looked up to find that even my ninth-floor room had disappeared, swallowed by the cloud cover. A warning. To be safe, I taught myself

to navigate Hyde Park using the topography of the sidewalks and the bottom four feet of buildings as landmarks: webs of cracks, uneven concrete slabs, decorative brickwork, cement foundations, church steps. Hyde Park bristles with churches, most much too large for their dwindled congregations, and their lonely stoops dotted my way home nearly every two blocks.

In dumb thanks for the bread crumb trail, every Sunday I dressed earnestly and crept along the sidewalk to visit a new set of steps. I did not know what I was looking for in the churches I visited, except that it was not there in the half-empty pews and all-empty air inside them, and I left each week knowing not to come back. After a year I found it in a church that looked like a fortress, on the corner of the neighborhood's busiest street. The heavy cloud-gaze I felt on me outside wavered in the church courtyard and vanished as I passed through the doorway. The sanctuary was made mostly of granite and was not always warm, but the air inside of it was dense with a living presence—the reader will supply, as she sees fit, the initial capitals—and as I sat on the bare pews the gray I had absorbed outside was slowly driven from me. In the silences between liturgical exercises, my eyes found the ceiling. I knew better than to think that God was in the rafters; I had been well taught as a child that God had no body and so no physical location. I suspect nonetheless that no one, including me and the insistent anti-anthropomorphists of my Sunday School education, has really destroyed in themselves the notion that God is up. But the stronger argument against a ceiling God is the everywhere-palpability of the presence that demands the whole of the space above and below and in between the small bodies in the pews, that fills the space and abides there. Each Sunday I came, always late, and slipped inside the presence in the sanctuary as though into a pool of water. For an hour a week I was stripped, without preamble or my conscious assent, of my shrinking fealty to the colorless air outside. The building itself, round and thick-walled like a stone womb, was sturdy enough to protect me; even the gray light seeping in through the high, narrow windows was, in that place, only light.

My third year of college I left Chicago to live in Kyoto, a mongrel city cupped by a circle of low mountains, the neatly-gridded bones of its eighth century construction holding tangles of streets navigable only by familiarity. I grew familiar. In time I forgot how I had been afraid and, dizzy with confidence, I extended my stay in Japan at the end of the year by spending a month in Tokyo.

My boyfriend lived there, in what was ostensibly a shared apartment, but in practice was three strangers keeping to their closed bedrooms, with an unused common kitchen as a buffer between them. His room was tiny, and in it my two suitcases were an affront. Unable to make them any smaller, I tried to shrink myself; unable to accomplish that, I spent as much time as I could outside of his room, in the city. I hated Tokyo, huge and complicated and mostly new, but

I hated his room more: it was not mine, it did not want me there, and the creeping end of the relationship was making itself felt primarily in the way the air inside his room seemed to dissolve the edges of me. He left each morning to go to an office where he chose to work, though his particular function allowed him to work from anywhere—this I correctly took to be a judgment on my idleness—and I sat quietly while he dressed, knees to chin on the bed to keep out of the way, memorizing the wrinkles in the drab sheets. Once he had gone I would bathe and dress quickly and run out in search of somewhere to breathe until my body became solid again.

Tokyo's enormous size and extreme population density have yielded one of the best public transit systems in the world. One can go anywhere in the city by train, above ground or underground or both, given time and a few dollar's worth of yen. Every day I locked the apartment's metal door behind me and walked to the small station nearby and scanned the posted transit map for a destination. The map was a tangle of varicolored ink, each color tracing a different train line, with the stops written over white circles. Some places I had heard of, and I made a day of a sightseeing errand that might only have taken an hour or two. More often than not I chose a train station for the number of syllables or an odd combinations of vowels in its name, memorized the transfers required to get myself there, and got half-lost in the streets around it until it was time to go back to the tiny room. The price of intimacy is the risk of having someone to mirror your failures, without any way of knowing if the mirror is distorted. I chose instead to keep myself in the dark.

Near the end of the month I was running out of stations within a reasonable distance, and so one overcast day at last resigned myself to visiting Roppongi, a neighborhood I had avoided because of its reputation as a haven for foreigners. I followed the flow of bodies away from the station and landed in Roppongi Hills, where I had no business. It was all sweeps of high-rise apartments that cost more to live in each month than I had ever had in my bank account at one time, rings of shops with French names and no price tags on their suits and handbags, restaurants with ruthlessly stylish interiors, well-groomed businesspeople. I drifted onto an escalator, which carried me up through the open center of a gracefully suspended mezzanine floor and deposited me on a white-paved outdoor landing high above the street. Glancing up for an indication of where I should go next, I found instead a spider so large that I had to crane my neck to see its body, poised to strike, and myself between the front-most feet just small and careless enough to be an appropriate victim.

Maman is a sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, first in steel, with six subsequent editions in bronze, of which one belongs to the Mori Art Museum and is installed outside of the Mori Tower in Roppongi Hills. *Maman* has no eyes, at least none that are visible from the ground. The small, cylindrical body is held thirty feet in the air by eight thin, twisted, too-long legs. It is named after Bourgeois's mother, who was, like spiders, efficient, industrious, clever, and protective, or so the artist says. It is a forced reading of the spider, or else a tertiary one. Spiders eat other creatures by liquefying and consuming their innards, they spin traps, they hide, they crawl, they leave bites that necrose until limbs must be removed if the bitten person is to be saved. The viscera object to them when they are seen in the light, a gut rejection of venom and stealth. If your mother is a spider, then what are you?

I did not scream because I did not want to make a scene. It had been years since I had looked up anywhere I might find a spider waiting for me, and the particular blow of this one, six times my height, legs fanned possessively, paralyzed me for a handful of labored breaths. Women

with expensive purses and men in pressed suits walked around me as though I were a part of the installation and I barely registered them. Understanding that a sculpture could not bite me did not protect me from feeling that I had been bitten already, that Tokyo itself was a poison like the tiny room was a poison, that I had been tricked into thinking that it was safe to look.

In some species of spiders, mothers carry their young on or in their bodies, tying their lives to the lives of their brood. Others, house spiders for instance, keep the eggs in a cluster within their web or funnel and position themselves in front of it, at which point they display more aggressive behavior than at any other point in their lives. *Maman* is holding a clutch of marble eggs in a sac beneath the belly, which are difficult to see if you are not directly beneath it, looking straight up.

As soon as feeling returned to my limbs, I backed away from the spear-point feet and eyeless body and fled down the escalator. I did not go to Roppongi again. This is not a story about overcoming that fear. I left Japan and returned to Chicago and when the air went gray again I was still afraid. I did not make a clean break with the boyfriend for another three years. If it is not the gray air, it will be something else. But every Sunday I crawled to church. Still crawl. When I move to a new city I go to church after church until I find one that holds the Presence of God like a fog, where it pulls at my limbs like stronger gravity and I can sit heavy in the pew and feel the gray leave me because no distraction by outside powers will be tolerated. I spend much of my life afraid, and only in a sanctuary does the sick whirring always pause.

The fear of God, suggests a Bible that never explains what that means, is holy and leads to righteousness. This is ridiculous on its face, the command to be afraid. We know fear, how it rattles inside us like a pebble in a shaken jar, and it leads to nothing but nausea and deep fatigue. There is no good in adding another pebble: the jar must be stilled. The wind and the word of God over the face of the chaotic deep created order and light, and Christ's command, half-asleep though he was on the deck of a boat, brought a storm to nothing. These are not gentle images, though they comfort. They are implacable impositions of will over forces that terrify—and that is the point—that the tyranny of lesser fear is ended for any space of time only by the assertion of fear's proper object. The fear of God, like the worship of God, is not to be yielded to gods which are no gods, or the fear that is an idol. Only when God is rightly feared does the voice come: "Peace, be still; be not afraid."

I have been in too many empty churches to argue for the special presence of God inside of particular buildings, unless it is in response to the plea we make when we build them. A sanctuary filled with the Presence (surely the reader will admit the initial capital) can exist only through an act of grace—so, walls to shield us, pews to bear us up. I consider the rafters, how they arch up and then together, joining at a center seam, as, perhaps, many legs beneath the curve of a cephalothorax.

Established in 2015 with a gift from the Frederick Buechner Center, the Frederick Buechner Prize in Creative Nonfiction is named in honor of the author and theologian Frederick Buechner, who, among his numerous honors, gave the Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School during the 1976-77 academic year. The prize of $1,000 and publications in LETTERS Journal *is awarded annually to a student in YDS. Bailey Pickens, 2016 Master of Divinity candidate, received the inaugural prize.*

MICHAEL CARLSON

OPEN MY LIPS

I thought it would be cold, but I sweat after a few minutes because the theatre lights shine on us. The stage is a raised wooden box, just large enough for both of us. She and I never touch when we hold our poses. Sometimes we help steady each other when we change positions, though, grabbing the shoulder of the other if our feet stumble or offering our hands to hold for balance as we clamber over cushions or boxes to offer our nude bodies for the young painters encircling us. They do not gawk. They stare. My body stares back, but my eyes focus on a slight crack in the wall or the water stain metastasizing across the ceiling, though sometimes my sight travels across a painter's vision fixated on some aspect of my body. I wiggled my eyebrows once at a painter as our eyes met. She laughed but smothered it with her hand before she made a sound. Her eyes were green. Her feet didn't touch the ground as she sat on her stool, and she almost fell off it.

I choose my poses and I only get embarrassed when that creativity is displayed. They tell me that I need to contort myself and spread and bend my arms. I open my legs wide and dangle my genitalia, bending one knee or both. I twist my neck. My arms move until I freeze in a position that just feels right. They rip their sheets of butcher paper from their easels after the time is up for that pose, so I make a different pose. The drawings lie on the ground until the end of the session when they choose the best drawings. If I look at the floor, I see dozens of bodies that look like mine, some more than others.

Charcoal is the loudest medium. It's the sound of a chalky rock that my friends and I used as children to write our initials on the wall under a bridge where no one else would ever see them, except for a lost bird or a bold fox sneaking into town. Pencils are quiet until one of the artists presses harder to fill in the dark space between a posed elbow or a bent leg. Pencils sound thin but smooth. Ink is silent. It's the same sound as my body passing her body without touching.

Because I'm such a part of their work, I feel that I should be there. But when the art stops, the silence lives only in my memory. A memory of silence, though, is more alive than dead. It keeps changing poses.

•

It felt wrong to watch them at first, even though they knew I was there. They asked me to come. It was their last prayer of the night before sleep and the stained glass windows were black. Rainwater had drenched my jacket and I laid it on the brick floor and looked up at the high arches of the stone chapel that could have been called a cathedral. There was no light where I sat in the very back. Even though they were so far away, I saw everything since candles, tall and heavy as young children, peered over their shoulders. The rows faced each other, perpendicular to the altar, two choirs. As I listened to them, I slowly let them trust me, and the urge to pull away grew weaker until it disappeared. The space between us mattered less and then even less as unnoticed time went by, years even, until they invited me to pass from that unlit back of the

Natalija Mijatovic, *Bodig*, acrylic, graphite and conté on wood, 2014. Photo by Chris Focht

stone chapel to be with them in the monastery.

I spent my first morning there with Br. John the Apostle replacing screen windows with storm windows. It took most of the day because there were so many of them and we worked in stretches of a few hours or less between prayers. He told me that a monk is not a monk without a monastery. Silence isn't silence without a body that moves, even if that movement is mere breath. He dispelled a common myth that Trappists maintain a strict vow disallowing any conversation during the day. They simply avoid unnecessary speech. Most speech is unnecessary. Speaking with me about my romance with silence, however, was necessary. I told him about my life and he told me that he had been a tax attorney who kept his love of silence from colleagues until he submitted his two-week notice. He baffled them. He didn't care. After more than a decade as a Trappist, he'd never had occasion to speak with many of his brother Trappists. But, he told me, he couldn't have felt more love for all of the men in the monastery.

As we struggled to make a crooked storm window fit, we heard the soft thud of a cane as an elderly monk appeared around the corner and lifted that cane from the ground, standing unsteadily to close his hands together and signal that we were in danger of being tardy for midday chant. We walked briskly to the chapel. Br. John entered before me and dipped two fingers into the holy water and, before he made the sign of the cross, he touched his still wet fingers to my dry ones to give me the water, not wasting a drop. We shared the tips of our moist skin for a second.

I went to my designated stall in the left-side row. The belfry sounded and one of the monks in the middle drew his jaws open and sounded the music of a psalm. He did not sing. He chanted. It was necessary. The psalms encompass all moments and spaces of existence. Despair does not escape them. Lust does not elude them. His chant that noon was a psalm of Awe. In a cavern with strong, simple colors filling stained-glass windows, our voices emulsified.

Chanting the Hours requires attention to each syllable of the psalm. Many of the old monks sang from memory. They often clasped the book of the Hours to their chests as they chanted. I sometimes closed my eyes during long notes. Many of us did. The Hours book is complicated for the uninitiated so I got confused often and a monk beside me, not losing the pace of his chant or breath, simply took the book from my hands, turned to the correct page and put it back into my hands. I whispered "Thank you" once, but not after that when others helped. My gratitude was presumed, appreciated. I never saw the eyes of the monks who helped me. I did, though, breathe with them at the end of every line. Men filled their lungs together for the sole purpose of chanting Awe or Lust or Despair. Or Desire. Or Gratitude. We shared our breath with each other. After a few days, I recognized each of the cantors' voices. An alto sang with vibrato. A tenor sang with a slight foreign accent. An old voice sang with what I thought then was melancholy. Now, I know that the melancholy was mine. He sang with belonging. I didn't have that. I'm still looking for it.

After vespers, I walked outside, unaccustomed to going to bed early. The stars shone clearly as no city lights polluted the night sky. I recognized Orion and couldn't remember the last time I'd been able to see him. I live in cities. I sleep through ambulances and police helicopters. I wake up during burglaries or gunfire. I wear noise. As I walked around the stone monastery beneath the stars, encircled by the forest, I saw the graveyard, a small field of white wooden crosses so bright that I wondered if the monks scrubbed them as a regular chore. As I fell asleep later in my bed, I looked forward to waking.

I got up on time for 3:30 a.m. lauds but became lost in the ill-lit labyrinthine hallways. A

very short monk spied me down a long hallway and gestured in a windmill motion to come to him quickly. I walked as fast as I could without running, my new sneakers squeaking loudly. He pointed to my sneakers and then to his grin. He grabbed my arm and pulled me around the corner, shoving me first toward the holy water. I dipped my fingers and turned, holding out my index and middle fingers for him to touch. I was surprised when he pinched them twice, so I looked at his face and he winked and smiled before shooing me forward. I settled into my stall just as the belfry clanged the half hour. We broke silence together and chanted, "Lord, open my lips." Opened, we filled our lungs together in the dark again and again. We hoarded sounds during the Great Silence, the period from the final evening prayers to morning prayers, and then spilled them all out at once, together.

A few hours later, still in the dark, we sat on wobbly benches to eat breakfast at sturdy long wooden tables. With our small aluminum bowls in hand, we had lined up to dip for broth in the enormous pot that never emptied. The broth was rich, a little oily, and dark red with black pepper flakes. We held it to our mouths and sipped it, trying not to burn our tongues. The thick bread went well with it. We didn't need spoons. We ate in silence except for one monk reading aloud a recently published book by a neurologist about how the human brain physiologically changes as it contemplates its own death. It was somber, self-serious. I caught the eye of the monk eating across from me who looked down the long dining room to the monk reading, then at me, and rolled his eyes, all without turning his neck. For lunch or dinner, we ate vegetables from their garden or pancakes with jam made from their fruit trees or spaghetti stained with sauce. On Sunday, we ate fish. I learned from the book read aloud during meals how we can, in a small but real way, keep ourselves alive when we really should be dead, just out of abject fear of the unknown.

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Sitting upright in the hospital bed, Mr. Ko told me that he had excellent balance, not like those other old men always falling and breaking their hips. Americans were too fat to have balance, anyway. Taekwondo was the greatest martial art and just what Americans need for their terrible health, he often said, even if he knew I was ignoring him. An untrained assistant to the orderly, my job at the hospital was simple. I worked for five or six male patients, each bedridden, some needing to be spoon-fed every meal. Some needed bandages changed often. All of them needed catheters switched out, sponge baths, diapers changed. The nurses, pressed for time, burned and nicked the men's faces with plastic shaving razors and cheap lather. The men liked it when I boiled water in an electric hot water heater to wet a hand towel hot enough, but not too hot, to lie on their faces as foreplay for a leisurely shave with a good razor I smuggled in. They liked how I ended their shaves by telling them to keep their eyes closed as I dipped my hands into a large cup of ice water and patted their faces all over as the shocking pleasure of cleansed pores closing tingled everywhere the razor had stroked them.

A blade, no matter the size or sharpness, pulled lengthwise across a man's day-old beard makes an ancient sound, and we respected it by listening. It was different when one of the men pressed the signal for his diaper to be changed. Then the two of us struck up raucous conversation as soon as I came into the room and started scrubbing my hands with antibacterial foam, swapping off-color jokes and turning his hospital bed into a locker room so he wouldn't be a feeble incontinent, just one of the guys. They teased me about what a terrible job I had, changing grown mens' diapers, as we did everything to make some kind of chatter to

distract from the tidal stench of excrement an adult can evacuate. Pounds of grey claylike feces spilled all over the bed after a man's constipation was relieved by an orderly snaking a tube up the man's rectum and pumping warm water into it. The patient talked throughout the whole thing, asking me whether I'd ever had sex on a swing before, or telling me that he had this one girl who couldn't orgasm unless he kept pricking her with a safety pin. I kept up my part of the inane conversation and he kept his dignity while being sodomized with a small fire hose.

When I quickly but thoroughly washed their genitals, guys looked at the TV or talked to me about baseball scores. Mr. Ko couldn't walk, but his arms worked fine, so I asked him if he'd like to wash his own privates. He stared straight at me and folded his hands behind his head as he chuckled softly, nodding toward his crotch. I obliged him, but it always unnerved me, his quiet smiling as I swabbed his taint and soaped his scrotum. Any other time during the sponge bath his shouting staccato voice wouldn't shut up. English was his third or fourth language, so he was difficult to understand when he spoke quickly. The slower he had to speak to be understood the more irritated he became at everyone's incompetence until he erupted in what I'm sure were curses at anyone in his presence as he threw his head back against his pillow and punched toward the ceiling.

I knew he was dying, so when he asked and then commanded me to grab his forearm and feel his muscle tone, I was hesitant. I gripped it lightly and he flexed. His strength surprised me, which he could tell because I read his eyes, the look of justified pride. To wash his back, I gingerly rolled over his avian skeleton wrapped in sinews onto its side, toward me, reaching over his body with the soap and wet cloth. He lay flaccid, only to ambush me by thrusting his fingers into my armpits and wiggling with all his remaining strength to tickle me. I'm not ticklish, but I couldn't help laughing.

During down time, the orderlies talked about reality shows or their kids and I'd see if any of the patients were awake and looking for a visit. If I walked by his room, Mr. Ko gestured me inward and bleated vulgar-sounding onomatopoeia until I sat next to his bed and listened to him talk. I rarely understood him. He knew but didn't mind. If I came across a sentence or fact that seemed pertinent, I repeated it to make sure I understood, and he impatiently corroborated or denied it, but I like to think that he appreciated the slightest effort. His wife visited on the weekends when I was off duty. None of his five children ever visited, though I know he loved them, especially the oldest, a doctor. His second son, a car salesman, was a disappointment, always lazy in school and now married to a fat American woman. He didn't know if his sisters in Taiwan were still alive or not. I nodded my head every so often, and sometimes a nurse poked her head in to tell us that he was too loud, which he dismissed with a loud, "Phhhfffft," sticking his tongue out at her, then smiling, a child who knows he'll be forgiven almost anything.

I woke him up every morning by whispering his name. In the beginning, he flopped awake as if ashamed to be caught asleep, smiling and laughing sometimes, and then bossing me around to get him something sweet, either a chocolate ice cream or soda—anything. At some point, I realized that I'd been shaking him awake, gently. He didn't shout orders but begged for me to stay with him even while he brushed his teeth. As I cleared his lunch tray, he whined that

I didn't visit with him as much as I used to, which wasn't true. I told him that I'd return in a few minutes, after I was done busing the lunch trays. I turned my back to him and started to walk out the door when his half-full Styrofoam cup of soda flew past my head and hit the wall, ice cube shrapnel everywhere. When I turned around, he looked at me and then covered his face with his hands, crying softly, saying that I was his good friend, he was so sorry. Crying wore him out enough that he fell asleep for a long nap and woke up smiling but not laughing.

He slept more and more. He even fell asleep in the middle of his sponge bath. His skin lost color. If he saw me when I poked my head in the door to check on him, he waved me in with his fingers, barely moving his head. He'd point at the chair next to his bed, jab the air and motion for me to sit down. He started holding out his hand, waiting for me to take off my purple nitrile glove and hold our palms together, gently, before he slowly fell asleep in perfect stillness. I slipped away when I heard him breathe deeply, maybe dreaming about his wife or children, though he'd started talking less about them and more about how he missed his sisters. Once, he had me sit down beside him as he took my ungloved hand and moved it to his naked chest, on top of his heart. The intimacy embarrassed me. I dreaded one of the nurses walking in, though they'd understand entirely. He petted my hand on his chest and I scarcely felt his heartbeat, but I did feel it purr, every pump of blood convulsing it slightly. Tears went down his face as he kept his eyes closed, still petting my hand. I didn't understand what he said to me, but it sounded like the same phrase over and over again. After a long time, I had to leave to finish my work and when I pulled my hand away, gently, he moaned and cried again, but I told him that I'd come back as soon as I could, which he didn't like hearing, but he let me go.

Later, an orderly tapped me on the shoulder as I washed a comatose man. The orderly and I entered Mr. Ko's room and closed the door. We had to clean his dead body before the family showed up to view it. I washed the crusted saline tear lines from his face and combed his hair. I shaved him carefully but quickly as I felt rigor mortis already starting to hold his cheeks in place. We opened the window for fresh air, something he had forbidden. After dressing him in a new hospital gown, we pulled his legs straight forward, unbending his arms on top of his stomach and chest, straightening them and placing them at his sides. We turned his head against the pillow in a way that closed his mouth. When the doctor arrived with the family I'd never seen before, I stood across the ward floor and watched them enter the room. I heard his wife cry out and wail. After a few minutes, they shuffled out, upset and sniffling.

An orderly and I closed the doors of all the patients' rooms so they wouldn't see us wheel Mr. Ko's corpse down the hallway. We took the elevator to the basement morgue. I signed his name in black ink on a toe tag and slipped it on.

I leaned against one of the metal tables and remembered Mr. Ko's voice. I never said very much to Mr. Ko. He didn't really know a lot about me. Though I know it's not true, in my mind, I shared as many words with him as he shared with me. He never said anything to me that his hand on my hand didn't make superfluous. I hope he heard me when I didn't speak but felt his heartbeat dying. Listening for him now, I hear us move past each other and then move past each other again. That's the sound I say when silence opens my lips.

Claire Beynon, *Somewhere between intuition and reason*, Oil on paper, 2016

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