

# LETTERS

ISSUE #2 SPRING 2014

LITERATURE/VISUAL ARTS & THE SPIRIT

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# LETTERS

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Abigail Dunn

## FROM THE EDITOR

### THE GERYON EFFECT

At the base of the seventh circle of hell, Dante and Virgil come upon a precipice. What's an epic-poet-cum-tour-guide to do? Every other soul that came this way was *dead*. But Virgil, must get *his* charge over the cliff alive.

Virgil lures a frightful creature from the murky depths. This *Geryon* will be their steed—a monstrosity from the lower circles of fraud whose winged reptilian form writhes behind the facade of a fair human face.

Dante the pilgrim must overcome feverish trepidation to mount the primordial beast. At this juncture, Dante the thirteenth century Italian poet also confronts a problem. How does a poet writing six centuries before the birth of the Wright Brothers describe the *sensation* of flight?

The poets, writers and visual artists who appear in this volume face a similar predicament. There is no available context for understanding the mystery they face—no empirical or experiential data to quantify the divinity that inspires them. And so they bravely climb onto the back of a primordial beast, plunge headlong over the yawning precipice and...

*fly.*

—Mark Koyama

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Megan Chapman** was born in Fayetteville, Arkansas and received her B.F.A in painting from the University of Oregon. Chapman has shown her work over the past seventeen years extensively throughout the United States and more recently in the United Kingdom. Chapman's paintings have appeared in various publications and are held in numerous private collections, nationally as well as internationally. Chapman creates mixed media abstract works on paper, canvas and panel. Learn more about her work at [www.meganchapman.com](http://www.meganchapman.com).

**Brad Davis** lives in Pomfret, Connecticut. He is author of *Opening King David* (2011), *Like Those Who Dream* (2008), *No Vile Thing* (2008), *Song of the Drunkards* (2007), *Though War Break Out* (2005). A new book of poems is forthcoming in the *Poiema Poetry Series*. Poems in the manuscript have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Image*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Cafe Review*, *Brilliant Corners*, *St. Katherine Review*, and elsewhere.

**Peter Duval** is the author of *Rear View: Stories*. He lives in Philadelphia and teaches in Spalding University's Brief Residency MFA Program.

**Elizabeth Engelman** lives in Florida with her husband and children. She has a Deaf son and is the founder of

Links of Hope Network, where she develops Deaf artisan groups and supports Deaf Education in developing countries. She received her MA in Poetry at The Poet's House in Donegal, Ireland.

**Jacob J. Erickson** is a poet in love with theology: a PhD candidate at Drew University in theological & philosophical studies, visiting instructor of religion at St. Olaf College, and eco-theologian in residence at Mercy Seat Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN.

**Alice B. Fogel** is the Poet Laureate of New Hampshire. Her third book of poems, *Be That Empty*, was a national poetry bestseller in 2008, and in 2009 *Strange Terrain* (how to appreciate poetry without "getting" it) came out. Nominated five times for the Pushcart, her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry*, Robert Hass's *Poet's Choice*, *Spillway*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Pleiades*, and she has received a fellowship from the NEA and other awards.

**Brett Foster** is the author of two poetry collections, *The Garbage Eater* (2011) and *Fall Run Road*, which was awarded Finishing Line Press's 2011 Open Chapbook Prize. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Atlanta Review*, *Books & Culture*, *Boston Review*, *The Common*, *Image*,



*Kenyon Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *The New Criterion*, *Pleiades*, *Poetry Daily*, *Raritan*, *Seattle Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southwest Review*, and *Yale Review*. He teaches Renaissance literature and creative writing at Wheaton College.

**Ryan Foster** received an MFA in 2011 from the University of South Florida with a focus in painting and printmaking. He currently teaches 2D design and drawing at The University of Montevallo just outside of Birmingham, AL. In late 2012 Ryan was picked up by the Richard Heller Gallery located in Santa Monica, California. In his work he creates fictional landscapes. Various quilts and curtains are added and turn the landscape into a stage or platform. This stage produces a space for a variety of narratives and characters to unfold and evolve. More information can be found at RichardHellerGallery.com or on his website jamesryanfoster.wix.com.

**Alysia Nicole Harris** is a member of the performance poetry collective known as The Strivers Row. She is currently pursuing her PhD in linguistics at Yale University and her MFA in creative writing at NYU. She has been published in *Indiana Review*, *Catch & Release*, Columbia's Online Journal of Literature and Art, *Adanna Literary Journal*, and *Tirage Monthly*.

**George Kordis** pursued studies at the postgraduate level at Holy Cross Theological School in Boston, where he specialized in both theology and

the aesthetics of Byzantine painting, gaining an MA in Theology. In 1991 he was awarded his Doctorate in Theology at the University of Athens, while in 2003 he was appointed to the post of lecturer at the same university. Today he is an assistant professor in iconography (theory and practice) at the University of Athens.

**Ashley Makar** writes grants for Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services. She's a contributing editor to *KtB*, a magazine for people made anxious by churches. She writes for *The Birmingham News*, *Tablet*, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. She's currently writing essays about living as ecstatically as possible with metastatic cancer.

**Christopher Martin** is author of the poetry chapbooks *Everything Turns Away* (2014) and *A Conference of Birds* (2012), as well as the Pushcart-nominated broadside "Marcescence" (2012). His work has appeared in *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume V: Georgia* (2012), *Shambhala Sun*, *Waccamaw*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Still: The Journal*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Town Creek Poetry*, and elsewhere, with poems forthcoming in *Grit Po: Rough South Poetry* (2014). The editor of *Flycatcher* and a contributing editor at *New Southerner*, Martin lives with his wife and their two young children in northwest Georgia, between the Allatoona Range and Kennesaw Mountain. You can find him online at [www.christopher-martin.net](http://www.christopher-martin.net).

**Jon Seals'** studio practice is organized around identity as it relates to memory, loss, and redemption. He works in both large and small formats, using painting, drawing and mixed media to articulate his images. His work mines fading memories in an effort to better understand how those memories shape his identity. For seven years he was chair of the visual art department at a college preparatory school in Clearwater, FL. In 2012 he received an MFA in painting from Savannah College of Design. Jon Seals has been exhibited throughout Florida, New York, Chicago, Boston, and Savannah.

**Michael Schmeltzer** earned an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. His honors include five Pushcart Prize nominations, the Gulf Stream Award for Poetry, Blue Earth Review's Flash Fiction Prize, and the Artsmith Literary Award. He has been a finalist for the Four Way Books Intro Prize, the OSU Press/The Journal Award in Poetry, the Slapering Hol chapbook contest, and a semi-finalist for the Zone 3 Press First Book Prize and Miller Williams Arkansas Prize. He helps edit *A River & Sound Review* and has been published in *Natural Bridge*, *Mid-American Review*, *Water~Stone Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Fourteen Hills*, among others.

**Vic Sizemore's** short fiction is published or forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Sou'wester*, *PANK Magazine*, *Silk Road*

*Review*, *Atticus Review* and elsewhere. Excerpts from his novel *The Calling* are published or forthcoming in *Connecticut Review*, *Portland Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Rock & Sling*, and *Relief Journal*. His fiction has been long listed for the Walker Percy Prize, short listed for the Sherwood Anderson Award, won the New Millennium Writings Award for Fiction, and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**Susan O'Dell Underwood** directs creative writing at Carson-Newman University. She earned an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a PhD from Florida State. Her dissertation concerned religion in Appalachian literature. Recent poems appear in an anthology of Tennessee poets, *Rock & Sling*, and *Alimentum*. She's also a featured poet on the radio program *Tennessee Shines*.



"Geryon" by Gustave Dore

## MICHAEL SCHMELTZER

### IN WHICH SEVERAL CREATURES DEBATE THE NATURE OF HEAVEN

#### I. HUMMINGBIRD

Think of life, the way we flit from flower to flower,  
drinking what nectar we can muster. Some want to  
hover in a hundred corridors that lead to a thousand  
rooms. Who needs such mansions? Pastel petals, no  
thorns, heaven should be as welcoming. Neighbor  
to the jeweled arils of a pomegranate: multi-faceted,  
ruby-hued, sweet to taste and tender on the tongue.

#### II. FOX

The fleshy throat – that stretch of weakness – matters  
most. Need proof? Ask the woodchuck I carry between  
my teeth. Before him the taste of blackberries, grapes,  
which brings us to my point. A den built among roots,  
below trees, is ideal. What better way to praise than  
to live in that which feeds us? What better place to  
be than in the dark throat of earth, already swallowed,  
when finally we become its meal?

### III. MOTH

I crave the candle's flame, the whip-like crackle of camp fires. Who among us hasn't known the lash of absence, love as a form of exile? My brothers dream of the sun. I know the light powder on wings, and I know of a powder placed in chambers, a black that sizzles, explodes. What intimacy – to become what you love so obsessively, to live in that light for one flash then propel into the dark forever. Sparkle. Dust. Home.

### IV. SNAKE

The universe, of course, was formed from an egg, snakes like gods born in the center of it. We eat our way out, devour stars like yolk, drink up planets. Isn't that paradise? And then even the universe we outgrow. We destroy from the inside out. Isn't that our nature? We live in a divine shell until we break free of it. Abandon the old altars. Leave heaven in ruins.





## SUSAN O'DELL UNDERWOOD

### PROTESTANT

*It is certainly possible that when the money clinks in the bottom of the chest, avarice and greed increase; but when the church offers intercession, all depends on the will of God.*

The 28th of Martin Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*

At the basilica's most penitent vesper hour,  
I come with craning neck, another tourist  
passing beneath the dozen millions of mosaic tiles,  
as advertised in the brochure.

But even this replica of the Pieta  
would bring an interloper's head to bow.  
Mary cradles her grown son, and I'm abashed.

Without so much as a penny of cash  
to slip into the locked brass box,  
I break the honor rule and light a candle  
for Margaret Anne, who is waiting to be born,  
upon whom we have waited as we waited  
thirteen months ago for her brother, stillborn.

Great sorrow is the strangest ballast for our baffled joy.

I have faith for only a moment  
that a baby's cry could bring down every tile.

What greater hope and hubris than the womb  
which carried God himself  
who hung there like a fist in the midnight orchard,  
a fish drowning against the nets,  
the perfected word which dies sometimes  
unspoken on the tongue.

The only prayer to pray, then, is her name,  
Margaret Anne, in praise of family saints.  
Margaret Anne, given before she takes one breath.  
Margaret Anne, a demand that I would wish to shout,  
ringing through every blood-red gilded chamber.  
But not even my loudest lasting echo can will her life.

So outrage as well as my submission I send up  
in this silent flame, a helpless prayer the blame  
and only cure we know  
ascending all at once, our pleas  
laced like smoke forever with our grievances.



ALYSIA NICOLE HARRIS

## THE RAT KING

One large rat hops on its hind legs carrying a waffle fry in its front paws.  
Four others pursue. One overtakes him, absconds with the prize and assumes the loser's  
anomalous gait. On the platform the passengers look on in rare amusement as each rat  
becomes a pogo stick. As each one bobs and warbles, waffle fry raised just above the head.

The tiny bodies slip beneath, between rails blending out of sight then there with a friend,  
a thin limp tail. Three- six- four –three more bend through a hole and disappear

as the train rumbles into place. For once the rats look polished. Like living  
gunmetal. Hardly vagrants—vigilant custodians of the night salvage.

A month ago, boyfriend on the fritz, I placed hand over mouth  
to keep from blurting God doesn't care. He throws my heart to wolves.

They will eat well tonight, divide up the spoils among the strong, skinny and the aged.  
Hunger, a thing they can leap out of. Peace is here, knowing

something tears through these walls, a great grey civilization  
pulses through garbage and not one crumb, not even the air, is wasted.



**Tied and Tethered**  
30x22" Mixed media on paper  
© 2013 Megan Chapman  
[www.meganchapman.com](http://www.meganchapman.com)

## BRETT FOSTER

### FIVE CITATIONS ON OUR HOPE AND PREDICAMENT

Remind me again: we are all of us mixed  
blessings, as John Updike quipped in an interview,  
and I suppose it'll likely remain so.  
I also guess that same 'all of us' will arrive  
one day in the center of our living  
having received with terrible awareness  
what Saint Paul once called *an answer of deeth*  
*in oureselves*. It will leave us like him grieving  
*out of measure passynge strengthe* (the odds are good),  
bearing in our bodies that singular dying.  
And just as the much-discussed Kingdom of God,  
which is made so much of in the Gospels,  
is better thought of as already instituted,  
inside us maybe, or at least signaling  
to us, blinking, ever present in our frailties,  
rather than some messianic finale merely,  
some coup of triumphalism yet to come  
(even as we await a promised coming),  
even so is that inescapable end,  
no matter any hopeful sequel or aftermath.  
We, all of us, not only must look into it  
eventually, effaced, passing through something  
like Dante's wall of fire, but within the fly trap  
of our consciences we carry it around,  
like a black and battered metal lunch pail  
that once felt the steel mills' extremities,  
or, if what William Matthews says is right,  
death always flickers in us like a pilot light.

### AVERY DA VINCI, OUR LADY OF THE WESTERN SUBURBS

In the upper room that is her bedroom,  
she spends her sick-day, part fevered, part bored.  
It's hard to remember that you're adored  
by those who love you when you're thirteen. Life's doomed,  
  
or at least it's gloomily slow for her today,  
already grounded before she grew ill.  
So she reads her fill of graphic novels  
sent by a kind friend from my grad-school days,  
  
who knew her as a toddler, saw a glimmer  
of vision in her doodled pictures even then.  
Better to serve the Sforzas of Milan  
than be a teen, painting by the body's timer.  
  
Upstairs, she works with daring on her art  
assignment, which is to adapt a given  
masterpiece. She's transforming da Vinci's  
*Last Supper* into a full-blown birthday party,  
  
leaving the apostles to rave with the best.  
I love her subversive genius in the pious  
suburbs, fancy it a legacy. (I'm biased.)  
Grant her happiness, O Lord, and give her rest.

## CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

### AT THE ETOWAH MOUNDS

*for William Wright*

We enter the ancient village by footbridge,  
my son running ahead through a meadow  
where butterflies and purple flowers bead the green,  
my daughter bound to my hip, chomping a cracker,  
crying every time I try to put her down.  
A weedeater crops grass at the base of a mound  
built by a people whose hush would fill a thousand years  
were it not for these hills, the relics of culture  
displaced in the wake of DeSoto and disease.

The machine whine stifles midmorning sounds—  
birdsong, wind whistling  
in native grasses planted by the DNR,  
the murmur of the Etowah  
making its way to Allatoona Dam.  
We take a staircase up the side of Mound A,  
rest on a bench at the top for a snack,  
share lukewarm water from a plastic bottle.

The temple that once stood where we sit  
binds itself now to a thing unknown,  
as do the daub huts and cornfields  
that filled the river valley  
when a priest held this highest place  
and two other mounds, almost as high,  
housed the dead.

Today the only divination  
pours from the coal plant due west in Euharlee,  
smokestacks tracing skyline  
like an invisible past, a thousand years gone,  
still hardly anything figured out.

Tired of the bench and the stillness,  
not troubled enough to take in the view,  
my children tell me they're ready to go back down,  
run the trail by the river, sit in a swing, see the geese.  
I pack up the crackers and water,  
pick up my daughter, hold my son's hand,  
lead them back to lower ground.



## ALICE B. FOGEL

FULL OF LIFE



**Pocket Full of Live Wires**  
16x20" Mixed media on canvas  
© 2010 Megan Chapman  
[www.meganchapman.com](http://www.meganchapman.com)

when we say *when I leave this earth*  
 we mean *when I leave this place I am*  
 and try to find anywhere where there are no unmarked graves  
 we keep thinking we're seeing where maybe there are none  
 shades of condensation the old horizontals  
 where fresh verticals of dirt scrape away to granite and glare  
 a kind of feral dusting of lichen  
 coats the history of the ones buried in a hurry and left  
 now we can't help but doubt and double back  
 make new assumptions about old assumptions  
 take on purpose everything  
 personally and then we just want to cry  
 if we knew what makes us  
 conscious if it was of atom or of Adam if particle  
 or God would that change our minds  
 every time we try we try to give up the ghost of gravity  
 we get so unbalanced we're ashamed and what  
 are our options  
 go down under humus like a seed  
 or be lifted into air by heat we're afraid  
 to tilt beyond the painted limits of the frame  
 we have a feeling we are the frame

Alice B. Fogel's poem **"Full of Life"** is an ekphrasis of Megan Chapman's **"Pocket Full of Live Wires"**

## ELIZABETH ENGELMAN

### FILLING EMPTY SPACES

Once, while lying side by side in the dark,  
you placed a small hand on my throat to feel my voice  
a whispered gesture as intimate as a lullaby  
and I consider this now  
this symphony of touch  
words suspended, frozen in mid air  
hovering over the bed between us  
like specks of ice  
Your palm outstretched to listen,  
my voice a petal, pressed between locked pages  
in a book that transcends translation.

All this, so much like the Wheeler installation  
remember how we waited in line for hours  
that afternoon in Chelsea  
not knowing what to expect  
only to walk into a room of pure light and nothing more  
a depthless space of bloated white walls  
as empty and infinite as deafness in the dark  
my eyes desperately searching for shape  
trying to fix onto an object, a corner, or an angle,  
but there was nothing,  
nothing at all to grab a hold of,  
a room so empty that light itself became a presence  
like the Spirit of God, hovering like a word  
over the surface of the deep  
Had I not seen it with my own eyes  
I would not have known that light too creates an absence

more blinding than darkness  
and pristine silence can fill a room  
with stories I read like a hieroglyph

Your hand mouth reaches to speak  
and I shine a flashlight on your thumb tongue  
finger lips move rapidly casting shadow  
puppets onto the bedroom wall  
I see your voice, I hear your face.



## BRAD DAVIS

### RETURN TO CORONADO

The ferry's a bridge now, lined  
with signs advertising suicide  
prevention by cell phone. I was  
almost delivered on that ferry, Bev  
in labor, their car loaded on first  
to be the first off; the hospital  
at the North Island naval base  
gone now, too, where they, like  
a flight deck crew, landed me days  
before Graham sailed for Korea.

It's been over fifty years,  
but I am back for a weekend,  
unexpectedly grateful for having  
not been born elsewhere, where  
there are no oil-slick sea lions  
lounging on bell buoys, or mile-long  
parades of sailboats setting out  
from and returning to harbor. No  
City College Jazz Fest, towering  
palms, or brown-faced pelicans  
doing their prehistoric best  
from off-limit Navy dock pilings.

Here in Coronado, by a concrete  
bench near a sand volleyball court,  
on any clear morning like this,  
one could easily forget that  
you cannot serve both the carrier-  
sized flag at the base's main gate  
and the Lamb whose players, from  
a small, Orange Avenue stage,  
raise no banner but His. And that,  
born to choose between these  
allegiances, I must re-cross  
the tempting bridge, board  
a jet for Connecticut, and prove  
this day whom I say I serve.

## JACOB ERICKSON

### OF ECLIPSE

I grew up praying to the moon,  
cupping the blue milk of it  
in my hands, unfolded,  
above snow divining crystals,  
evergreens longing toward  
that wax and wane of heavens,  
stream nocturnal glory  
into the candled eyes of foxes, curled,  
smoke of deer-breath, white-tailed—  
an impossible cloud of liturgy swirling  
over the face of the earth's frozen crusts, and  
on some nights, eclipsed in brilliant darkness,  
I still caress what's left of my lunar faith,  
its crescent a solitary tear rolling down  
the palm of my hand, the praise  
singing of faded starlight,  
"Let my prayers descend before you  
as incense."





# PORTFOLIO: GEORGE KORDIS



In 1997, the combined attendance for a pair of exhibits of Byzantine art, in New York and Salonika, Greece, exceeded a million people, a staggering success for displays of largely religious artifacts from a distant civilization. The response begat a lineage of related exhibitions that continues to this day (the most recent major Byzantine show opened last fall in Washington and is in Los Angeles through August), and brought into the mainstream the extraordinary painted icons of Orthodox Christianity, an artistic tradition nearly as old as the faith itself. While historic and aesthetic interest no doubt accounts for a measure of the continued popularity, icons exert a force that can spark a frisson of sacredness in even the most secular viewer. Resplendent with gold leaf, intricate designs, and rich colors, the depictions of saints and angels, Scriptural tableaux, and images of Christ are objects of reverence and acts of faith. Their persistent, profound otherworldliness, at once remote and intimate, answers directly to the soul.

In the work of George Kordis, the painted icon remains a living force. One of the acknowledged mas-

*The Last Supper*, Egg tempera on wood, 100X100 cm.



ters of the form, Kordis creates frescoes and panels for Orthodox churches and holy sites in his native Greece and abroad. YouTube contains a series of videos of the artist transforming the bare interiors of new churches into majestic devotional spaces. Kordis has also taught the theology and praxis of icon painting at leading international universities, including Yale Divinity School's Institute of Sacred Music. In his bio, the artist identifies himself first by his Doctorate in Theology from the University of Athens, and only afterward by his training at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and with Cypriot iconographer Fr. Symeon Symeou. The emphasis on theology expresses the icon's essence not as expressive artwork but locus of veneration.

The contemporary icon navigates a liminal tension between modernity and its own long tradition. Kordis styles his creations, "Byzantine Icons in a Postmodern World," evoking a past still negotiating with the present. "I maintain the established forms of the icons (faces and compositions) and seek mainly to enrich the iconographic details, which give theological dimension to the picture, and also improve the stylistic solutions," he writes. "My goal is to reach, with God's help and enlightenment, a painting result that would not be simply original and personal, but functional for the holy life of

*The Presentation Of Christ To The Temple,*  
Egg tempera on wood, 80X119 cm.





the Church.” In his book *Icons as Communion*, at once an instruction manual and theological primer, Kordis observes that people and events in his paintings, “are to be seen not only to have occurred in the past, but as extending through time and reaching into the present.... Iconography exists to this end: to express through art the truth that Christ and the saints are ... present in the mystery of the divine Eucharist.”

—Timothy Cahill



*Saint Isaia The Ascetic*, Egg tempera on wood, 40X40 cm.



*Saint Priscilla The Martyr*, Egg tempera on wood, 25X40 cm.

***George Kordis: Light and Rhythm***  
an exhibition of the artist's portable icons, will  
be on view at the Institute of Sacred Music,  
Yale Divinity School, April 14-25, 2014.





*Angel Bringing Food to Prophet Ilias*, Egg tempera on wood, 40x60 cm.



# OLD THINGS ARE PASSED AWAY



*Short fiction by VIC SIZEMORE*

Three days after her eighteenth birthday, Berna left Ironton, Ohio with no intention of ever going back. Jesus was busting her loose.

Gerald drove her to Pinewood Bible Institute in Meadow Green, West Virginia. It was a grueling six hours through the mountains, with Gerald cursing and punching with his finger at the radio. He couldn't keep a station for one whole song because they were down in between mountains, and Berna laughed to herself every time a song faded into static or got shouted over by another station. At least the radio gave him something to focus on, so they didn't have to talk or not talk, and be sitting there knowing it and knowing the other knows it too.

Now here she stood, in the middle of her new room—her new life. She was in the brand new gal's dorm, Evangel Hall.

The window was barred with rebar welded into a grid and painted black. The welds were raised and lumpy like scar tissue. Outside the window a rise of mud and gravel ascended to the jagged edge of the pine forest where the hillside had been ripped away for the building, and rain-water had eroded a whole interconnected series of little ditches down the hillside.

The door swung open and a high-pitched voice said, "Hiya." A gal with a strawberry blonde bouffant hairdo and a puffy face bounded into the room. "I was just down the hall," she said as she closed the door. She looked at Berna and stopped dead: "Heavens, look at you, how skinny. What's your secret? You Berna?"

Berna nodded.

The gal was fat. She bulged from a white blouse and brown wool skirt. Her calves were like white hams. "Welcome to Pinewood," she said. "I'm Deborah. Deborah Vickers."

Berna didn't say anything. She nodded again.

"You have more stuff to bring up?"

Still, Berna just nodded.

"Right on," Deborah said. "I'll help." She turned and disappeared into the hallway. Her high voice called back, "Fat girls are as strong as oxen."

Berna followed. Deborah's thighs rubbed, her hose made zipper sounds.

The cement steps in front of Evangel Hall had been recently poured, and they were still dark and wet-looking, with the broom strokes still crumbly on top. The late August day was warm and white without clouds,

just a bright smear across the entire sky. The smell of the pine forest wafted across the parking lot. Two turkey buzzards circled high and silent over the mountain that rose behind Evangel Hall.

Gerald leaned against his VW Squareback Sedan smoking and surveying the campus. "You sure you don't want me to help?" he asked. He flipped his cigarette butt onto the gravel. A trembling string of smoke twisted from it.

Berna said, "I'm sure."

"Suit yourself." He watched two guys walking across the parking lot toward the main building, Perkins Hall. They had on short-sleeved white shirts with skinny ties and dark pants. They walked with straight backs and both carried large, well-worn Bibles. Gerald sneered and pushed at the gravel with his boot heel.

Berna saw that Deborah was watching him nervously as he pulled another Pall Mall from his green work shirt pocket. He whipped open and lit his silver lighter with two smooth strokes of his grease-stained thumb.

Deborah looked away, and then leaned into the open hatch of the Squareback. "This all that's left?"

"That's it." Berna wiped her hands on her new denim skirt. The religious girls in Ironton wore long denim skirts, so it's what she'd gotten. The skirt was too big for her and she had to gather and pin it in back.

"We can handle this, sir." Deborah slid out Berna's box of blouses and under things.

"Okee-dokey," he said, and took a long, satisfied draw on his cigarette. Deborah gave him another nervous, sideward glance.

As they entered the room with the boxes, Deborah asked, "How long have you known the Lord?"

"Four months." Berna leaned against the painted cinderblock and closed the door with her foot. The paint was still a little tacky.

"Far out." Deborah put the box on Berna's bare mattress, took Berna's box and put it on the bed too. She said she could tell Berna was a new believer. She told Berna that she and her parents were missionaries in Osaka, Japan; her parents were on furlough, staying in the missionary apartment of their sending church in Charleston for the year. "They're al-

ready homesick for the work there," Deborah said. She said, "When they go back this time, I'm staying here in the States."

Berna said, "You grew up in Japan?" That's why she was weird.

"Let's pray," Deborah said. She stepped up and stood in front of Berna and, like it was the most natural thing in the world, started praying: "Our heavenly father, Lord, we come before you now in Jesus' name and thank you for such great salvation..."

The air was acrid with fresh paint and bleach. The bed to the right was already claimed by Deborah with her pink and cherry patchwork quilt on top, and hard, green Samsonite suitcase underneath. The room had the beds, two plain wooden dressers, two recessed closets without doors, a full-length mirror on the door, and nothing else.

Deborah's voice grew louder: "Lord, for this babe in Christ. Berna." At this she reached out and took both Berna's hands in her own soft hands. She smelled like flowery lotion. "Thank you Lord," she said, "for your promise that He who has begun a work in you will continue it until the day of completion..."

Berna was inches away from her new roommate's face: There were tiny blue veins on her eyelids that wrinkled as she squinted to pray and constellations of freckles spread across her cheeks and her pale nose, and she had downy fuzz above her plump upper lip. She puckered her mouth as she said Lord. Her moist breath smelled of caramel and vanilla.

Berna leaned her face closer, closer, until, in little earnest bursts like a message from the Holy Spirit, Deborah's warm breath--old things are passed away, and behold all things are become new--puffed onto her face, into her nostrils and her open mouth.

Professor Minor sat directly across from Berna in the missions classroom. Above the black board the great commission was painted in bright orange: GO YE INTO ALL THE WORLD AND PREACH THE GOSPEL. Instead of desks in this room, students sat in wooden chairs that were set in a circle. There were guys and gals together in this class.

Zechariah Minor taught missions as well as chorale. His suit coat hung from the back of his chair. His hands were on his knees like he was ready to spring up. He saw Berna and his face beamed. He was in his late thir-

ties, going bald on top. He wasn't married.

He started prayer requests by asking everyone to remember Mr. Hopkins's family. She'd heard students talking about that; his grandson, Sgt. Jeffrey Bell, was called home to be with the Lord three months earlier, in Danang, Vietnam. Mr. Hopkins was the name on Berna's schedule beside her Anthropology/Hamartiology/Soteriology class. (The older students called the class an-ham-sot.) Mrs. Hopkins was the name beside Berna's Marriage and Motherhood class.

Professor Minor opened the first day of class by asking for prayer requests. "The Lord tells us," he said, "in James chapter five and verse sixteen that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availed much." He straightened his back and said, "Yes, Ida." He raised his arm and pointed. He was thick like a football player, no neck. Sweat soaked through the armpits of his dress shirt, even with an undershirt on.

Berna leaned out to look and scooted too far back in the slatted chair, which tried to fold closed on her from the back. Deborah grabbed her arm and waist and they giggled. Professor Minor looked at them, then back at Ida.

Ida Powers stood at her chair. "Pray for the work in my country," she said.

"Ida's parents are serving in Kenya," Professor Minor said directly to Berna, apparently the only one who didn't know.

Ida said, "There is great unrest since the president was assassinated." She had un-brushed blazing red hair and her face and arms were covered in dark freckles. She wore a peasant dress and weird leather sandals. Her legs weren't shaved.

Professor Minor said, "John Purdue and I had the opportunity to minister there this past summer. We were blessed to lead eighteen Kenyans to the Lord in a single night."

Some of the guys said, "Praise the Lord," and "Halleluiah."

Deborah said, "Far out," and it made Berna giggle.

Professor Minor said, "Pray that God will continue to bless that work."

Deborah leaned close to Berna's ear and whispered, "Ida is leaving school after this semester. She's getting her M-R-S degree."

Berna turned to look at the girl with the wild red hair again. She whis-

pered, "What?"

Deborah whispered, "Married."

"Berna," Professor Minor said, "would you stand up please?" All the students in the circle looked at her. Two guys bounced their legs, and all the guys held worn black Bibles on one leg or the other.

She stood and leaned over and tried to take Deborah's hand, then stared at the great commission printed above Professor Minor's head.

"Berna is our newest chorale member," he said. He beamed at her again. He said, "She has the voice of an angel."

Berna had no musical training so Professor Minor tutored her two evenings a week, using notes shaped like triangles and squares and diamonds. She struggled and eventually told him she didn't want to learn notes. Still, he made her the alto in his traveling quartet.

Berna and Deborah went to classes together and had lunch together and every afternoon—after Berna went in and vomited up her lunch; Deborah never found out, never knew, and Berna liked having this secret on her—they laid out their blouses and skirts and took off their slippers and bras and crawled under their covers for long naps before dinner. Every night they compared prayer journals and prayed together before bed. Every morning Berna sat on her bed and watched Deborah get ready.

One morning in October she sat on her bed watching Deborah, who stood at the door mirror in her skirt and bra, and Deborah said, "I know a secret about Ida Powers." Her mouth was full of bobby pins. "Her fellow is from Kenya."

A gal walked by the door. The bathroom door down the hallway made a yelp like a kicked dog when a gal opened it, then let out a long, low groan as it closed.

"The fellow she's marrying?"

"Yes. And he's Negro."

"No," Berna said. She straightened her back.

"The Institute doesn't know yet." Deborah turned from the door mirror and gave Berna a serious stare. "They're going to have a cow."

The bathroom door down the hallway yelped and groaned again. Deborah sprayed the bottom layer of her hair. She swirled the top around.

Let down, her hair fell halfway down her back.

"I guess it's how she was raised," Berna said.

"It's not how she was raised."

"I guess they have different ideas about things over there."

A gal in the room above them--Chastity Martin or Mary Bell--scraped a chair across the floor.

Deborah pinched a bobby pin out of her mouth and sucked saliva. She turned her head to see the side. "Still. A Negro?"

"You grew up in Japan. Would you marry a Japanese?"

"No."

"Let's pray for them."

They sat Indian style on Deborah's bed with their knees touching, like they did in the evenings, and took turns praying for Ida. Deborah's hair was half-done and she had bobby pins in her hand. They had tiny plastic bulbs on their tips. Her breath smelled of a chocolate diet chew.

After the prayer, as they leaned out for their hug, Berna's face touched the mole on the base of Deborah's neck.

In chorale that day, Berna stood in line with the other singers beside the piano as Professor Minor played. He told them to put a finger in one ear so they could hear their own voices inside their heads. Berna put her finger in her ear and hummed the alto part for "Saved, Saved." Outside the window she saw Deborah walking in golden autumn sunlight. She was with a guy in the gravel lot, dragging her heels and dropping a shoulder toward him now and then, cocking her head flirtatiously. Her brown skirt was crooked, hiked up on her left hip exposing the lacy bottom of her slip—she had put on her light blue panties that morning as Berna watched, was wearing them right now. Red and orange leaves blew in wide swirls around them.

"Berna," Professor Minor said.

Everyone was looking at her again. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was day-dreaming."

"Would you stay for a few minutes after class?"

She nodded. The other singers looked from Professor Minor to her and back. Ida Powers grinned wide. She had bad teeth. Probably bad breath

too, because of them.

"Remember at the end," Professor Minor said. "Hold the first and second saved for three full beats, then for four on the final one." He flipped the sheet music over and positioned his hands over the keys. The part in his hair was like a map of a creek running into a pond, the bald spot on the back of his head no bigger than a silver dollar. He pressed down on the keys. "Take it from, 'Life now is sweet,'" he called over the reverberating chord. "Fingers," he said. Berna joined the other singers putting fingers in ears. He pounded the chord again and they started singing.

That afternoon, Berna and Deborah were back in the room, taking off their blouses and skirts for their afternoon nap.

"I have something to tell you," Berna said.

Deborah said, "I'm getting so fat." She pulled off her bra and had a sharp red mark where it had been digging into her flesh. Her breasts spilled out onto her pasty stomach. She squirmed out of her girdle. Her legs were as lumpy as biscuit dough.

Berna said, "No you're not."

Girls were running up and down the hallway, laughing.

"It's a real bummer, man." Deborah picked up her Bible and prayer journal from her bed and set them on her dresser. "I don't get it. You eat every bit as much as I do and you're still a skinny Minnie." She unwrapped an Ayds diet chew and popped it in her mouth. She offered one to Berna.

"To me you look perfect." Berna climbed back out of bed, took off her own bra and let it drop to the floor.

Deborah said, "What fellow wants to marry a heifer?"

A gal out in the hallway let out a scream that tumbled into laughter. She went running by the door, thumping sock feet. Two or three gals followed. Squeals and laughter rang down the hallway.

Berna stood in front of Deborah's bed with her arms at her sides. She said, "To me you are the most beautiful person ever."

Deborah turned to face the closet. She sniffled and her jaw slowly worked the diet chew.

Berna stepped behind her and wrapped her arms around her and



pressed her whole body against Deborah's back.

"I mean it," she said.

"You're sweet." Deborah pulled away. "But you know what I mean."

Berna said, "If I was a fellow, I'd marry you in a heartbeat."

Deborah crawled into bed and pulled her pink and cherry patchwork quilt up to her neck. "What did you want to tell me?"

Berna crawled back in bed too. "Someone wants to call on me in the dating lounge."

Deborah rolled toward the wall.

"A fellow."

Deborah was so silent for so long that Berna thought she might have gone to sleep. Berna waited, then said, "You'll never guess who it is."

"Zechariah Minor." Deborah's voice was a flat accusation.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Why should I be mad?"

"I don't know. You sound mad."

"I'm not mad, so drop it."

"I don't like him."

"He sure digs you." Deborah rolled and looked at her.

Berna stood up again beside her bed in nothing but her underpants.

"If you don't want me to, I won't," she said. "You're my best friend." She took a shy step toward Deborah's bed.

Deborah said, "That's between you and the Lord." She rolled back over. "Can I take a nap now, or are we going to spend the afternoon rapping about professors?"

That night, in their beds in the dark, they started talking about Ida Powers and Africa.

Berna started it. She said, "I thought of something today. I thought you and me could go to Africa and minister as missionaries, like Ida Powers. But we don't need husbands."

Deborah said, "She wouldn't be getting married if it wasn't a Negro."

Berna said, "We could go to Africa and minister."

Deborah was silent.

"Or China. Wherever. We could go, you and me, be missionaries."

Deborah said, "You're right. We could."

They started planning. They would go to Africa. They would be missionaries together. They would win souls and minister, and serve the Lord in that dark land. Why not? Why couldn't they? Deborah got so excited, and Berna did too. They giggled together as they talked of it. Eventually they were sleepy and the conversation trailed off.

Berna said into the dark, "Love you, Deb."

"Love you more," Deborah said sleepily, happily.

It was the last Wednesday of October. Professor Minor had been calling on Berna in the dating lounge in the evenings. It was a room at the entrance of Evangel Hall with two couches, some tables and chairs and a ping-pong table with one broken net brace so that it stood on one side and lay flat on one side and guys came over and played with it like that. There were no bars on the dating lounge windows. It was dark out when he came mostly, and the night windows reflected the inside of the room.

This evening, after he preached at campus prayer meeting, Professor Minor brought a whole six pack of Squirt soda, green bottles in a yellow carrier, and a brown bag with oatmeal raisin cookies that Mrs. Hopkins had baked for him to bring. There were two other couples in the lounge, sitting on the couches with their faces only inches apart, like they were trying to neck without breaking the no-physical-contact rule. Each couple had a black Bible on the couch between them, which was not an actual rule, putting a Bible between you to remind you not to sin, but a strong enough suggestion to make not doing it look like backsliding.

Berna sat in a chair with her Squirt soda and didn't eat any cookies while Professor Minor sat in a chair he'd pulled to face hers, his big Bible on the floor between them. The "i" in the word "Squirt" on the green bottles was dotted with a tiny heart. He kept holding the bag out, offering her cookies.

Professor Minor talked, mostly about chorale, and then soul winning. He was nervous, looking around, scooting his behind up and back on the chair. He relaxed a little as he told her about his Road to Damascus experience right here at PBI, when he'd been living for Self and God got a hold on him.

"Nothing is more important than soul winning," Berna said.

"I can tell you are growing in the Lord," he said. He held the cookie bag out to her again, she said no thanks, and he got himself another one and pushed it into his open mouth. His chest and arms were like a bulldog. "I need to tell you something," he said. He said, "I feel the Lord calling me into the pastorate. Three churches have asked me to candidate."

"You won't teach music anymore?" She took a sip of the soda. It was tart and a little bitter like grapefruit, more fizzy than Coke or Pepsi or RC Cola. She liked RC with peanuts in it. If she told him that, he'd bring it to her.

"If I take a church—" He fidgeted and looked around, then leaned over his Bible and looked down at it.

He sat looking down for an uncomfortably long time, and then blurted out, "It is not good that man be alone." He sat up straight and said, as if preaching a sermon, "The Lord says in Ephesians five, verse thirty one, that for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and the two shall be one flesh." He leaned over and put his elbows on his knees, looking right into her eyes. His aftershave was strong. He was sweating he was so nervous, which was kind of sweet. And sad.

She looked down, found the little heart dotting the i on the cold bottle. She stared at it.

"We need to seek the Lord in this," he said. "Are you actively praying for the Lord's will in your life?"

She nodded and said, "Deborah." She said, "We pray every single night."

"Will you seek the Lord's will regarding this?" He was asking her to marry him, in his way.

She nodded that she would.

Professor Zechariah Minor kept calling on her and she did nothing to discourage it. One Sunday, their gospel quartet was suddenly cut, without explanation, to a duet. She traveled weekends with him. They got permission from the dean to ride alone together in a car. It was a new car, a Datsun/2, mustard with a black vinyl roof. A few months earlier, Zechariah's dad had led a man to the Lord who owned a car lot in Logan.

He was so thankful that he gave Zechariah the car. It still smelled new inside.

They went to churches all around, sang several numbers, then he preached, then she went back to the pulpit and sang while he went down front and gave the invitation. They were a team alright.

Deborah became distant because she was jealous, Berna knew. But then she got a guy to start calling on her, a guy named Jerry Epps, who Berna happened to know Deborah did not like at all--the first three weeks of school the two of them had secretly called him Booger Boy because he had spent a whole breakfast the first day of classes talking to the two of them about world missions with a booger flapping in and out of his right nostril—how could he not have felt that? Booger Boy was graduating and looking for a church. "Epps," Deborah said one night. "Deborah Epps—Debbie Epps has a nice ring to it." She practiced signing it on a piece of notebook paper. Deborah stopped praying together with her at night—she was busy talking about Jerry.

The last Sunday of fall break, Berna rode with Zechariah to his dad's church in Logan. Snow flurried from a low and dark sky most of the way as they twisted through the mountains. Black and bare trees leaned in and seemed to be aware in some threatening way, like faceless watchers. Berna shivered and Zechariah turned on the heater.

Before the morning service, they sang "Softly and Tenderly," and then a new song Zechariah had come across, called "Pass It On." He played it on his guitar and taught it to the congregation while his dad frowned in the front row. Berna stood beside him and harmonized, staring at the words painted right on the wall above the exit: YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE MISSION FIELD.

After the service, they had dinner at Zechariah's mom and dad's. The house was bustling with people, like Christmas, and they were all there to meet Berna. Zechariah's mom and grandma and sisters made a feast: turnip roots boiled with neck bone, dumplings made with corn bread and the pot liquor, sausage sandwiches, home-baked peach cobbler and pineapple upside-down cake. The dining room was so hot with a fire in the fireplace that Berna felt sick and dizzy. Zechariah's family grinned at her

as they ribbed him and recalled embarrassing moments from his childhood.

On the ride home, Zechariah said, "You know the way I wave my arms while I lead congregational singing?"

She nodded and looked at the little knob on the glove box.

"I'm going to teach you that. It'll come in handy for when you lead singing in gals' gatherings."

Berna said, "I've been wondering why we don't do anything at Pine-wood to help poor people have food and clothes."

Zechariah went into a long explanation about people called rice Christians, in China and places like that, who say they got saved so they can come to the mission and eat free rice. "What's the importance of the dying body next to the eternal soul?" he said. He said they had to focus on the soul and not let worldly concerns muddle the issue. They were to be about the business of winning souls to Christ.

When he was finished, she nodded that she understood. It didn't sound right to her. Seemed like they were spending a lot of time doing what Paul said, and not much doing what Jesus said to do. She didn't want to get in a fight. She kept quiet.

Zechariah Minor flexed his arms and gripped the wheel. His face was red. He had tiny dark hairs sprouting along the rim of his ear. He wasn't so young.

The road rose and fell and snaked in and out of valleys and mountains, and snow spit against the windshield. Hot air blew steadily against her chest and the right side of her face. Still the road weaved and curved, rose and fell.

She didn't even have to reach in her mouth; her body knew this was too much food. Berna vomited between her feet, in the floor of Professor Minor's new Datsun.

He pulled off at a roadside rest. Vomit was on the bottom of her coat, so she took it off. Professor Minor only had a suit coat and he took it off and draped it over her shoulders. She went and sat at a picnic table that had names and cuss words carved deep all over it and full of dirt. He leaned down in his hatch and tore a lid flap off a cardboard box of books. He scooped the vomit from the car onto the gravel, holding his feet out

wide to avoid splatter and looked like he was ready to be frisked by a policeman. The back of his shirt pulled out of his slacks. Here and there lone snowflakes drifted.

At the edge of the rest area was a fifty-gallon drum painted red white and blue, full to overflowing with food garbage. Chicken bones and brown beer bottles were scattered around it. The smell of shit--number two; she asked the Lord's forgiveness for thinking a cuss word--rose to her nostrils. Berna pulled Zechariah's suit coat around her shivering shoulders, bent her head between her knees and retched.

"Didn't tell me you got car sick," Professor Minor said over his shoulder as he tore more cardboard and pressed it flat in the floorboard. He said, "We'll have to keep that in mind in the future."

Back on the road traveling, the car heater made the vomit smell cook inside the hot car, but Berna couldn't stop shivering. He tried to make her feel better--he was a good man. He sang through some hymns and asked her to practice the alto. She said she still wasn't feeling good.

After driving silently for a while, Zechariah Minor said, "I've prayed a lot about the Lord's will for our lives." He adjusted the heater and pinched at his nostrils like he needed to sneeze. "I have peace that the Lord desires we get married over the Christmas break. There's the missionary apartment in the Hopkins's downstairs that is unoccupied. The Institute has offered it to me. My dad will do the wedding, so there won't be any charge."

Berna had her feet planted wide on the cardboard covering her vomit spot. She pulled her knees together, then crossed her legs.

He asked, "Have you prayed for the Lord's will?"

"With all my heart," she said.

"Do you believe the Lord leads?"

"I do."

He reached out and put his hand on her hand. It was the first time he had ever touched her.

She froze.

He turned her hand over and interlocked their fingers. They rode this way for a number of miles. As they approached Hawk's Nest, he needed both hands to negotiate the hairpin turns over the mountain. When he

put his hand back on the steering wheel, it was trembling. He had never fucked—she prayed for forgiveness—he had never known a girl before.

“It’s settled then?” he said. “Partners in ministry and in life?”

She nodded and looked out her window.

They drove past a Quonset hut with a sign that read, “Mystery Hole.” It had a giant gorilla on top and a VW bug posed like it had run off the road and crashed into the building. There was no real hood; the hood was painted on the wall of the place, all wavy on the corrugated metal wall. It was a building like Gomer Pyle lived in. Trees pressed in around the road. They were on a ledge cut into a mountainside.

When they pulled into the gravel lot in front of Evangel Hall, it was five. Two hours before Sunday night service. The founder of the school, Dr. Perkins, was giving a special sermon on being passionate about winning souls, called, “Do You Weep When You Sow?” As soon as Zechariah put the car in park, Berna flung the door open and ran for her dorm.

“Are you sick again?” Zechariah called after her.

She turned, still moving toward the dorm. “A little. Could you write me an excuse if I don’t come to church tonight?”

“Sure, sure.” He opened his door and stepped out of the car and put his hand on the vinyl roof. “You need me to get you some Pepto?”

“I just need to lay down,” she yelled over her shoulder as she ran up the cement steps.

“I’ll check on you later,” he said. Then he added, as if he’d had to think on it, “Sweetheart.”

She charged up the steps and down the hall and into the room. Deborah was standing at her dresser with her coat and scarf on. She jerked her head, startled. She had gotten her hair cut short and done in a style that pulled it down around her face. She looked fifteen pounds heavier in the face alone.

Berna pounced as she turned her body, and wrapped her in an embrace. “I missed you,” she nuzzled down the scarf. It was scratchy on her cheek and smelled like mothballs.

“How was the week?” Deborah asked while they hugged.

“Four people were saved. I led my first person to the Lord--a lady re-

sponded to Zechariah’s invitation at Montgomery Baptist Church and he called me up to go to the prayer room with her and I did it.”

Deborah backed away and clapped her hands and said, “I wish I’d seen that action.” She was chewing a fudge Ayds diet chew. The fudge spit made her teeth look like they were outlined with a brown marker. “I have some news too,” she said.

Berna knew by the huge grin on Deborah’s face what the news was. She said, “A number of people did business with the Lord.”

Deborah said, “Right on. Listen, I have news.”

Berna grabbed her Bible from her dresser and plopped down on Deborah’s bed. Before Deborah could go on, she said, “I’ve been praying--fer-vently praying--and the Lord has given me peace about something.”

“What’s that?” Deborah stepped to her dresser, swirled a cloud of hairspray around her head and watched herself in the mirror as the mist settled.

“The mission field.”

Deborah said, “Praise God.” She clomped over and sat on the edge of the bed beside Berna.

“I’ve been praying fervently about something else too. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“Same thing, you,” Deborah said.

“I don’t want us to be apart. We could go together to the mission field, we really could, you and me, like we talked about.” She opened her Bible to I Corinthians 7:3. “Listen,” she said. She read the verse: “The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit; but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”

Deborah didn’t say anything.

“We talked it over already. Remember? We were going to serve the Lord. Someplace like Kenya, where Ida is, and we wouldn’t have to get married at all.”

Deborah scrunched her chubby face at Berna like she was looking at a smashed blacksnake on the road. “Like nuns? Like Mary worshipers?”

“No. Just us two, you and me, serving the Lord together.” She said, “You and me.”

Deborah shook the disgusted look off her face. "All my life," she said, "I've known." She smoothed her coat down her belly and tightened her jaw at Berna. "I'm called to be a pastor's wife."

Berna stared down at her Bible. It was getting worn at the edges like the preacher boys' around campus. Deborah didn't know anything at all about men. Why else would she be so all-fired ready to live in a house with one. Same reason Berna's mom did: clean sheets on the bed, food on the table, safety from what was so unspeakably shitty outside the house that she opted for the shitty man inside the house.

But they could have gone together to the mission field without men. They could have done it. It was not to be, and she knew what it meant for her: marry Professor Minor, let him fuck her, have his babies. Or go back to Ironton.

She could not go back. She would not go back.

Deborah said, "Jerry took a church. He's going to be assistant pastor at Varney Bible Church." She held up her hand and showed Berna a tiny diamond ring cutting into her puffy finger. "This is my news," she said. She said, "Jerry got permission from the dean and drove all the way to Charleston and asked dad for my hand in person. Isn't that romantic?"

Logan was close to Varney. Zechariah could go to his dad's church.

Deborah said, "We're going to be married and I'm going to be a pastor's wife, just like I've always known. We'll serve together, and I'll do the women's ministries and I'll have three kids—three is the perfect number, I think, I was one of three—and the Lord will bless." Deborah got this cloudy look on her face, gazing out into her glorious future with Booger Boy.

So be it, she thought. This is where the Lord is leading. Be a help meet for Zechariah. It could be worse than this. He's not so bad. He's a good man. He works hard.

Berna put her hands in her lap and said, "The Lord's leading Zechariah and me into marriage too."

"You two are practically married already." Deborah grabbed her left hand and looked for the ring. Deborah's hands were icy and chapped.

Her coat was tight and pulled at the buttons and bound so that Deborah couldn't bend completely at the waist.

"I don't have a ring yet, but we're getting married over Christmas break." Berna pulled Deborah's hands onto her own lap and gave them a brisk rub. "You're freezing," she said.

"Who would have guessed, back in August, that the Lord would send us both husbands so soon?" Deborah stood.

"I don't feel good," Berna said. "Maybe you could stay here with me tonight."

"Have to go to Howard Johnson's. To rap about the things of the Lord with Jerry before service." She fluffed her scarf up under her chin, and with her hair pushed in around it, her splotchy face looked like a fat rear-end squeezed into a swing. "I'll check back."

Deborah left.

The door clicked shut.

The room was cold. A dresser drawer in the room above scraped. Chastity or Mary padded across the floor above. Through the window bars, on the hillside, white ice crystals on the frozen mud clods gathered up what small light was left and glistened in the darkening day.



# THE DEPOSITION



*Short fiction by* PETER DUVAL

It was not until V. had pulled away into the Iowa night that he noticed anything unusual: the priest he'd picked up was bleeding.

Nothing dramatic, just an oozing, a glistening patch of black on black. V. decided not to mention it. For a mile or so, he didn't know what to say. The priest had a full face for a thin man, with dramatically defined tendons in his neck that seemed to tense for no particular reason, and a small, meticulously trimmed goatee, which surprised V. because he'd never known a member of the clergy to have a goatee, not even on cable television. But he hadn't been this close to a priest for a long time.

On the way home from a deposition in Davenport, V. had taken the back roads—a whim. He didn't have many. But he had some time, and he'd been listening to Elvis Costello whine about how pretty words didn't mean much anymore from the digital recesses of his iPhone play list. About half an hour into the drive he saw, from a distance, the priest—he didn't know it was a priest at that moment, not yet—leaning against a sign at the intersection of two unnamed blacktops. V. slowed the Lexus to a stop on the broken asphalt of the shoulder, and powered down the driver's-side window, and looked out at the man. Yes, it was a priest. He was dressed like one. He was standing about 15 feet away. He wasn't carrying anything, no luggage, not even a messenger bag or a man purse (something V. knew most priests would be comfortable carrying, having long since given up on the husbandry of masculine iconographies). The man made no move, either toward or away from the car. Odd. He seemed content to return V.'s succinct acknowledgment—barely a nod—without expression. On a case years back involving gross negligence in a church parking lot, V. had spoken over the phone a number of times with the monsignor of a parish out in Council Bluffs, a smoker, V. remembered, from the sound of his voice. The case, whose details were crushingly monotonous to stir up, had turned out badly. A mess, actually, though through no fault of V. himself. Something to file away and forget. But face to face with a man of the cloth? No. It had been decades. And the way the man just stood there. It was unnerving, and a little weird. He seemed about the same age as V., early forties, and he was dressed in black from his patent-leather shoes, which, apart from a coating of dust, appeared brand new, to the all-black generic baseball cap he wore, straight-brimmed, no curve. Urban style. Maybe it was a designer Chicago Cubs hat, a black C embroidered on black canvas. Huh! Since when

had baseball caps, generic, designer, urban, or otherwise, become accessories of priestly style?

"Father," V. said finally, flatly. Even now, even this early in the episode, V. had become aware of a nibbling, inchoate anxiety, as though the roused metaphysical chickens of his whimsy in taking the back roads were already making the slow turn toward home—to roost—and he felt charged by the impulse to drive away, to stomp on the gas and take immediate leave of this most disquieting dude, watch him vanish in the rearview back there with the road dust and deepening gloom. For his part, the priest appeared content simply to meet V's gaze with his own hooded eyes.

V. was feeling charitable. It came on him of a sudden. "Hop in, padre." Yeah, just like that. Another whim. (They were piling up today.) This one, though—it felt like stepping into time, or history. Without batting an eye, the priest walked around, opened the passenger's door, and slid efficiently inside. They pulled away.

After a few moments of silence, the man spoke first. He asked V. what he did for a living. Point blank: "What line of work you in?" He sounded a little like he was from Brooklyn, though V. had never been to New York. So he had nothing to go on but another species of mediated reductivism: "Brooklyn accent," "priest," "urban style."

V. told him the truth, that he was a lawyer.

The priest nodded and without missing a beat asked V. where he lived. He didn't seem to want the street number, just the general area. At this, V. experienced a wash of what can only be described as vertigo. (Actually, it can just as easily be described as dizziness.)

V. let loose. Come what may. "Des Moines," he said. Bam!

As for V.'s name, the priest didn't seem interested. Which was just as well because V. would have given him no more than an initial, even if pressed, and this most likely would have put a strain on things. And things were already strained, if for nothing other than the bleeding.

"Thanks for stopping there," the priest said after a spell. V. looked over at him. It sounded like honest gratitude, or as honest as one man can be with another in this world. He realized he was sick and tired of the uncharitable and reductive manner with which priests had been repre-

sented of late. A priest was just another guy. No big deal. It was a job. A service economy job. That said, V. found himself visited by a tinge of annoyance. Ten minutes before, this guy, this priest, this hitchhiking priest, was walking in the near-dark along a rural highway through the middle of Iowa. And it was getting cold. The man should be grateful, priest or not, but then, just as fast, V. cast his mind back to what Jesus himself had to say about acts of kindness. V. forgot the exact wording. Jesus had never actually used the phrase acts of kindness; He hadn't even understood English. The point being, as V. recalled: Not only did pride goeth before destruction, it sucketh dry any treasures you had laid in store up in heaven. Like malpractice insurance.

Then they were miles further along and V. found himself in the middle of telling the priest all about the deposition he'd taken in Davenport, from which he was returning, and during which an overweight female client sitting across the table from him with an angelic face and mild, almost childlike, disposition, had fallen into a monumental coughing fit that V. suspected—he was sure, actually—was nothing more than an affectation, a performance, poorly executed, because the episode had lasted only long enough for each side represented in the case to agree that they could, at present, no longer continue. "Let's reschedule," said the woman's lawyer, a man V. knew only as a pair of close-knit eyes and a single eyebrow, a kind of incompetent legal Cyclops of a man. As for the woman herself, she'd been doubled over, her eyes bulging. But the theatrics hadn't convinced V. Standing there holding out one of those conic paper cups of water that you have to drink from fast before they soak through, he'd felt vaguely ashamed. Even embarrassed. She should have taken the initial settlement offer he'd made. Which was ample. Years before, the woman had been injured in a traffic accident involving a reef-er—trucker lingo for a refrigerated eighteen-wheeler. This one had been carrying so-called "gourmet" ice cream sandwiches and was insured by the company V. represented. That's the kind of law V. practiced. He went to bat for insurance companies. The bigger the better. He helped minimize their exposure or, if their exposure had invited disaster and disaster had accepted the invitation, he helped minimize their damages. It was a line of work to which long ago he'd reconciled himself. Working for

the Man. V. was good at what he did. He had an extensive client list. He was a rain maker. There was no disputing this. Though no one used that phrase anymore without irony or finger quotes.

"An affectation?" the priest said. He was heaving his words a little now, bleeding as he was from the side. Surely the lungs were affected. "So you think she was faking it?"

V. was concerned now by what he detected as a slight modulation in the priest's voice, as well as an otherwise imperceptible repositioning—a stiffening?—of the man's shoulders. It was a sensitivity he'd trained himself to ignore, with considerable success, because you couldn't carry on conversations, business conversations or personal conversations, if your attention was always catching on observations of such insignificance. There just wasn't enough bandwidth for all that. Then, with a rush, V. felt afraid he'd said too much about the case; a not entirely unfounded fear, he'd learned, because everyone seemed to know everyone else in Iowa, which wasn't a state as much as a vast system of often unreadable, even malevolent, causality, and you could end up on the receiving end of the legal world's version of bad karma so quick, it wasn't even funny. He shivered. He forced himself to breathe deeply, because sometimes it was just the thing. He didn't know what else to say; he asked the priest his name. He didn't really care, and just before V. forgot it, the priest told him, his right hand extended, which V. clasped, if awkwardly, and firmly shook. "Pleasure to meet you," V. managed. Beneath all of this, V. had been searching for a politic—maybe joshing?—way to broach the topic of the bleeding, which seemed to have grown worse. But there were extenuating considerations. To wit: Though the bleeding struck him as an issue important enough to raise, wasn't it even now a little late to be doing so? He was certain that blood loss of this magnitude constituted something by which a minimally sensate and responsible person should immediately be taken aback. As in, Oh, hey! Etc. Insurance lawyers all the more so. But then, what kind of person—priest, layperson, whatever—himself bleeding, went around ignoring other people's blithe insouciance in the face of such a grievous and obvious physical injury?

Was V. exposed in any way?

He didn't know where the words came from, but they came: "Are

you—comfortable?"

The priest was monitoring their progress through fields of monotonous soy. A genetically uniform monocrop. He nodded without turning.

"Comfortable enough."

V. stopped himself before voicing anything that might be mistaken for tacit stipulation of the bleeding itself. The man's an adult, he thought. He's an adult priest, with all the resources of the Roman Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints at his disposal. Calm down. If he needs help from the likes of me, a guy who hasn't seen the inside of a church for decades, he'll ask for it.

The priest asked, turning suddenly, "What's on your mind?"

V. managed to conceal his shock at so direct an assault, which registered as a disembodied thud against the general low-level dissociation he'd been experiencing for some time now. "Well, the usual, I guess," he said, surprising himself again, with his own moxie this time, the tone of his voice. He didn't want to go writing checks with his alleged self-confidence that his timid ass couldn't cash. The blood had so saturated the left side of the priest's jacket, that it seemed to shine in the green light from the dash. The man asked the question—again.

V. felt the familiar surge of mild confusion that sometimes preceded his initial words in court, words he'd practice for days beforehand. Then it was gone: "When they say that—and I'm aware this is stodgy, what? dogma?—that The Virgin Mary was bodily assumed into heaven—"

The priest winced as he sat up straight. "The who?"

"I mean, not that I have any business asking, I haven't been to mass in—"

"Blah. Blah. Blah."

V. wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. He decided he hadn't. "When they say that The Virgin Mary was assumed bodily into heaven, what does that mean exactly? Because when I hear something like that—"

The priest coughed violently.

"—I sort of zone out," V. said, his voice rising a bit, despite itself, "because, really, how can such an utterance make any sense whatsoever? I mean, if language itself can be said to denote anything at all, that is. If we occupy, you and me, the same universe." It was true; he'd wondered

about the topic, though not in a long time. Maybe before day's end he'd finally put the issue to rest.

Even so, why was he talking like this?

The priest touched the wet spot on his jacket and, working the moisture between forefinger and thumb, held it up to his face and sniffed.

"Isn't heaven—" V. began, faltered deliberately, rhetorically, then pretended to try again: "Didn't Jesus say heaven is at hand?"

The priest smiled thinly, his face on angle. "'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Indeed."

"Right, so if it's at hand—" V. held out his right palm. But this time, encountering the priest's alarmingly emotionless expression, he almost faltered for real. All at once the man looked deathly bored.

"Oh, Jesus," he said.

"—and it's not a place—"

"Check yourself." The priest raised an index finger. "Who the hell told you heaven's 'not a place'?"

V. could smell the blood now, a kind of secret smell like something at the back of a junk drawer you never opened. He willed himself not to worry about his leather seats. They weren't his leather seats. The Lexus was a lease.

"You don't go to your cardiologist to talk root canal," the priest said. He seemed to be addressing the burlwood of the glove compartment.

V. watched him for as long as safe driving allowed.

"Do you go to your cardiologist to talk root canal?"

V. shook his head no. "Are you a cardiologist?"

The priest waved the question aside him with a petulant swipe of his hand. "Then what are we talking here?" He patted the left breast of his black wool jacket, remembering something. His voice gentled. Bending closer, he spoke as though delivering an aside: "Oh, remind me, will you, when we're done with this: I got another favor to ask."

"You bet."

"Anyway, us discussing the finer points of doctrine, back and forth, as though you and I were both adequately informed? What I've learned over the years. Know what that would be like?" The priest issued a brittle laugh. "Me holding forth on tax law. And you could put everything I

know about tax law in this." He held up a tin of Altoids. Original flavor. He snapped open the lid and offered one to V.

"I'm not a tax lawyer." V. cornered a chalky mint. "But I think I see your point."

"So ask yourself, what difference would it make," the priest said, fingering around inside the tin himself now, the wax paper all a crackle, "my trying to explain to you how and why, after hundreds of years of theological discourse, the Church holds that the BVM is bodily in heaven?"

"BVM?"

He looked over, annoyed. "Blessed Virgin Mother."

"Hey, it might," said V. "Make a difference."

"No, sir." The priest popped an Altoid into his mouth and licked his fingers. "Anyway, I'm not going there, not today. She's in heaven. Her body is. Let's leave it at that. Have a little faith, if not in the doctrine, then in the vestigial power of language to mean what it actually says."

V. made a wincing, foul-smell face. "How, though? How can it—"

"You must have a problem with your hearing," said the priest. "What did I just say?"

V. didn't appreciate the man's tone, at all.

"Look, it's technical, is all I'm saying. Like anesthesiology. It's just as dangerous. And if you haven't put in the time, which forgive me for saying strikes me as obvious in this case, what's the point? It'll go right over your head." He made a zooming sound, his hand weakly motioning at V.'s scalp. "So permit me to give you the standard take-it-on-faith-leave-the-rest-to-us-and-go-on-about-your-business line and we can drop it. Let's enjoy the ride." The priest snapped the Altoids tin shut. There was blood on the white metal, which he spirited away.

"Do you believe the BVM's body is in—" here V. made quotation marks in the air with the fingers of both hands, letting go of the wheel for a moment—"heaven?" He regretted the gesture immediately.

The priest looked at his shoes. He shook his head. "What d'you want me to say? Will it make a difference?" He drew a deep breath. "Do you really think it's a question of belief? Yes, OK. I believe it. So? How helpful is that?"

V. sighed loudly and rolled his eyes.

"Hey, buddy, spare me the attitude!" the priest said. "You're a man now. It's time to put away childish things. All the 'this-not-that' foolishness. You don't give a rat's ass about the BVM. Move on to other concerns and stop wasting our time." He patted the breast of his jacket again, pushed the bill of his cap back, and looked out at the darkening geometry.

V. was going to say something, his mouth began to move, he even heard the saliva therein snap, but now, amazingly, the priest's hand lay lightly on the right shoulder of V's white business shirt. "So," the man said, his tone kindly, "that favor."

V.'s sinuses were alive with the Altoids. He checked the time on the dashboard clock. It was an involuntary motion. The priest followed his eyes to the clock, then back.

"Hey! I don't want to put you out," the priest said, settling back into his seat. "You were kind to stop for a stranger."

V. smiled. "Did everyone else just drive by?"

"No," said the priest, "you were the first car I saw."

"Just how far are you going, anyway?" V. asked. "Where can I drop you?" But it came out all wrong, like a challenge.

The priest flashed his eyebrows. "You can pull over right here, god-damn it."

V. was horrified. "No, I didn't mean—"

"Stop right here," he said, firmly. "Pull over."

"I'm going all the way to Des Moines. Really, it's fine."

The priest fumbled with something in the breast pocket of his black jacket. Annoyed, he finally managed to pull it free, dark and heavy, then slapped it onto the slant of the dashboard without taking away his hand, the back of which was smeared with fresh blood. It was a gun.

"Pull over," he said again, his voice half an octave lower this time. "Do it. Now."

V. applied the brakes, the tires barked on the asphalt, and as he angled onto the shoulder, the rumble strip blurted something unintelligible, and the gun cracked forward into the windshield, then dropped into the darkness at the priest's feet. He fished it up, his eyes bright with pain.

"Look—" The priest held the gun by the barrel, the way you'd pass a

sharp knife to a child—by the blade. "Take this. Now."

In the quiet, V.'s breath whistled in his nostrils. He flashed to Lazarus, the one who died, the one called forth stinking from the grave, not the rich thirsty guy in hell. "You want me to take that."

"Yes." The priest's attempt at a smile—a squint-eyed grimace full of anguish and loathing—was the worst thing V. had seen so far. "I want you to take it."

V. took the gun, and it was warm. Fascinated, he examined it in his hand. He turned it over. As in a dream. It had a square-ish barrel, the word AUSTRIA engraved on the side. "And do what with it?"

With some difficulty, the priest drew his left knee up onto the bucket seat so he could face V. "OK. This is an odd request, I know, but the hour is upon us, and I need another favor. So-called." He removed his baseball cap, which left an architectural dent in his damp dark hair. "I'll just lay it out there. Man to man. You're a lawyer. I'm sure you appreciate plain speech."

Was it a joke?

"Out in that field—" The priest jerked his thumb over his shoulder into the fogged window. Thump. He twisted, his eyes pinched in pain, and widened the dot awkwardly with his palm so they might both see out into the world beyond. But it was too dark now. "It's like this: we walk out a hundred yards from the road. Take an evening stroll. Then, you shoot me in the back of the head." The priest coughed a bloody aerosol into his palm.

"Why?" V. asked.

"Well," said the priest, in the tone reserved for intercourse with idiots, "because I no longer wish to live."

V. couldn't look away. He wanted to. In the dashboard light the priest's eye sockets were green-rimmed and empty. "Why not?"

"You expect me to take you through it? I don't know you from Adam."

V. struggled to avoid a rush to judgment. This guy was a priest and, as such, inscrutable. He must have his reasons. They were a strange tribe, after all. He hefted the pistol in his hand. "Just put it—what?—to the base of your head and—?"

"Shoot." The priest leaned stiffly away from V., his chin buried in his



chest, and indicated a spot three inches above the collar of his shirt, just above the line of his neatly cut hair. His fingers were slender, almost elegant, his nails manicured to a slight point. "Right there. See? Yeah. Let's get away from the road, though. I don't want anyone to see and I'd hate to mess up your interior."

V. looked at the leather seats. *Buttery* was the word the salesman had used. They were smeared with blood now, some of it already brown and dry. "Hey, when I said I was having a hard time with the doctrine of the Assumption—"

The priest faced him again, his jaw muscles in knots beneath his circle beard. "You think I'm kidding about this?"

"What am I supposed to think?"

The priest reached for the gun. "Give me that." But V. shifted his position, the weapon shifting with him, out of the man's reach. He'd never held one before. The handle had been machined for exquisite comfort in the palm. Was it loaded? And how might he know, short of pulling the trigger? In last year's Christmas gift name draw at the firm, one of the older partners, cheerful Morrissey, had bought him a black NRA cap and fake membership card as a gag gift. It had gotten a big laugh. The gag had worked. Whenever Morrissey came by his office, V. would whip out the cap and go all Charlton Heston on his ass, and whatever topic they discussed seemed somehow lighter. V. wasn't a gun guy. Briefly, just after the invasion of Iraq, in the patriotic delirium, he'd experienced a passing infatuation with Second Amendment literalism, imagining himself in an dead-end exchange of gunfire through broken windows with Bush's paramilitary on their round-up of subscribers to *Mother Jones*. But the round-up had never materialized. He did like the way the gun felt in his palm.

The priest snatched it away. He ejected the magazine from the grip, held it up for V. to see that it was, in fact, loaded, with copper-shiny hollow points, then snapped the magazine into place, pulled back on the cocking mechanism. A series of quick, deft movements. He turned the gun's dark barrel on V. "Get out of the car."

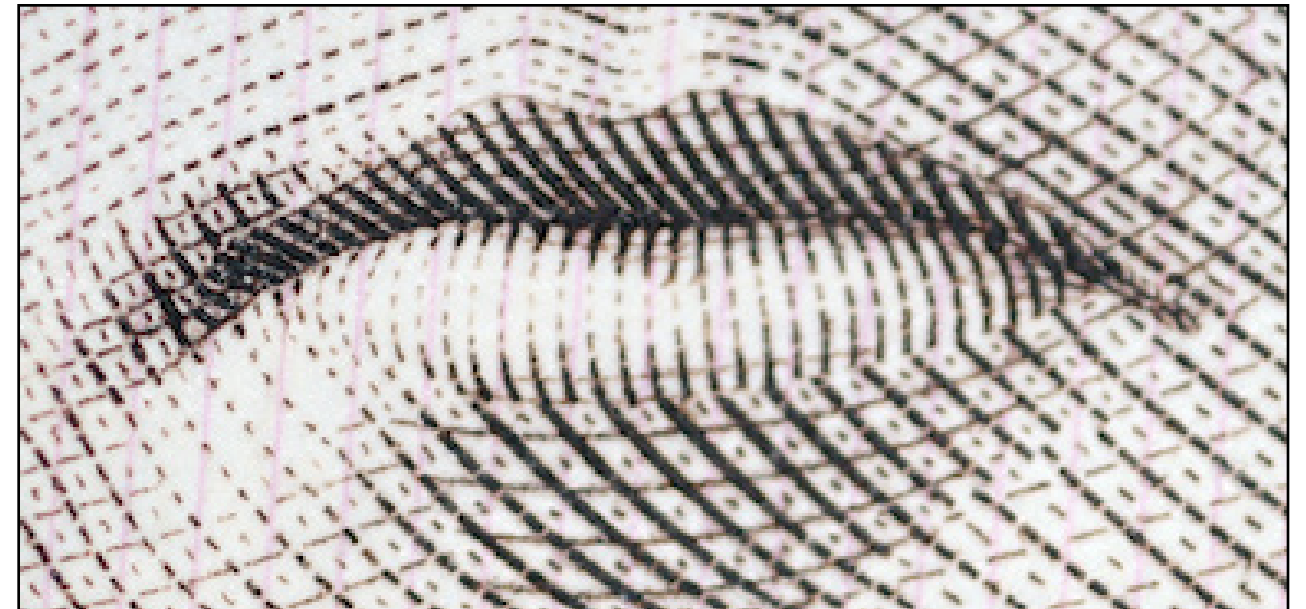
A substantive moment of what might be described as tentative silence ensued.

"Father, you're scaring me."

"That's what I'm trying to do," the priest said. "I'm motivated. I want to motivate you."

V. yanked on the chrome door latch. The door disengaged. He stepped out. All around, the countryside was vast and black. Above the curved roof of the Lexus, he watched the priest emerge, whose face glowed unhealthy and white.

"Come over to this side." He motioned with the gun. Then, softer, as though to himself: "I'm sorry about this."



V. started around the front of the car, then noticed the spill of cab-in light on the road and backtracked to shut the door. When he came around again his arms were raised.

"Put them down, for God's sake."

V. lowered his arms.

"Believe me. I wouldn't be taking such extreme measures if—" He pointed the gun across a ditch illuminated by the car's bluish headlights. Cornflowers twitched brightly in the wind. "You first. Out there."

At the edge of the incline, V. hesitated. He recognized what lay before him as an *open-channel ditch*, the term surfacing from years of legal briefs detailing highway spin-outs, people falling asleep at the wheel, carefully worded narratives of absolute mayhem. Often, drivers ended up in one just like this. Drunk, shattered, crippled. Dead. He couldn't see



the bottom of the ditch, though he saw well into the rows of soybeans, to the limit of the headlights. Maybe it was alfalfa. He had some questions. He was considering how best to phrase them when he turned to see the priest, much closer now, his eyes crazy-wide and rolling, the gun pointed at V.'s chest. Road grit outlined the wound in the priest's black suit jacket; it sparkled when he breathed.

They said it at exactly the same time: "Please." Neither of them smiled.

"I have a kid and a wife," V. said. He meant it. It felt like he meant it. But there was no wife and no child. There had been, for longer than he could remember, but only in his imagination. In the seam between sleep and waking. Which is to say, he was alone.

"I don't," said the priest.

V. glanced up from the gun. The man wasn't smiling.

"This is awkward," said the priest, "no bout adoubt it." He stumbled after V. into the ditch, then scrambled up out of it, struggling for breath. "But it's really simple, how it's going to work. Then you're on your way. With a story to tell. Not before you shoot me in the back of the head." He swallowed, with difficulty. "I'll waste you if you don't."

They started to walk. Loudly, the priest ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. A death thirst. V. knew it from the movies. The westerns. The noirs. The legion of gut-shot characters, good or bad, it didn't matter—in their last moments they always pleaded for water. You knew who was a good guy by noting who answered the request. "I can imagine what you're thinking," said the priest. When he showed his teeth again it was just as horrible as the first time. More so. "In five minutes, one of us'll walk out of this field, get in the car and drive away. I'd look silly as hell sitting behind the wheel of a Lexus. Not that I—"

"You mind filling me in on a couple of things?" V. asked. But the priest was too busy high-stepping through the alfalfa to answer. "Maybe I'm missing something, because what if I just turn the gun back on you after you give it to me and then I'll have all the power and I'll just refuse to shoot you?"

The priest stopped to glower at V. from beneath an oily brow. He was trying to keep his balance, his arms spread as though the answer were

obvious even to an idiot. "I'll just lunge at you in a rush of blind rage and take it back." Everything about the man said he was serious. "You'll have to shoot me if you want to live."

"Got it." V. nodded. He felt short of breath himself. "OK, then. May I ask you another question?"

"No. No more questions."

"Are you really a priest?"

The man staggered forward, then righted himself. He was trying to stand tall. Close up, he seemed older now, but then V. had known him mostly in profile.

"Society of Jesus?" V. asked.

"Get going."

"What's the theological angle on this, Father?"

"What did I tell you about that stuff?"

"Isn't it a sin—"

The priest stopped walking. He canted left, then right, as though demonstrating in slow motion a dance step far beyond his skill. He pointed the pistol into the sky and tried to pull the trigger. He could not—not with one hand. "No talking now. Only moving now." He nearly fell backward, but then, righting himself, with both hands on the gun, he managed to squeeze off a shot, the sound of which the sky swallowed with one gulp. "See?"

V. trudged farther into the field. The crop whispered to his ankles. From behind him now came a gurgling in the man's chest. Once again V. fought the impulse to run; for a moment he saw himself sprinting away over black-green fields. Wouldn't the line of lights along the horizon part like wings to welcome him? He managed to keep walking, fully under control, the priest moaning and gasping at his heels, until, just beyond the reach of the halogen headlights, he heard the man stumble, and V. turned to see him kneeling in the crops, his fingers splayed white on his thighs. A silhouette against the headlights, his shoulders heaving.

V. shuffled closer. With his feet, he fished around in the furrows for the pistol, found it, picked it up.

"Give it here," the priest whispered. He'd shed the Brooklyn accent, but he might have been delirious. "And all this could be yours," he said.

The phrase seemed to require an accompanying gesture the priest was unwilling or incapable of making.

When V. held the gun out, he was surprised to see it pointed at the priest's head. He waited into a silence made deeper by the hollow sound of a jet airliner miles overhead.

Finally, the priest took a deep breath. "You don't know how to end this, do you?"

That tone again.

"You think you do," the priest said. He laughed a few raggedy syllables, then his breathing caught up with him like a gang of thieves; he began to hack and cough.

"Look, just shut up," V. said, still pointing the gun at the man, and moving now toward the car. "Wait there." He had only taken a dozen steps before the field swallowed up the man's coughing as completely as the sky had swallowed the gun shot.

V. heard the growl of the engine as he skidded down into, then up out of, the open ditch channel, his soles glad for the firm surface of the concrete. He had a plan, the first real one of the evening. Not a whim. A plan. He would angle the Lexus forward into the ditch, first the front right wheel, then the back, down and up the other side and into the field. Easy. And in a moment he was doing just that, the tires crunching soybeans. Not so hard at all, not for someone who knew what he wanted. Next, he saw himself pulling the priest, whom he would find lying face-down and blood-slick in the furrows, by the shoulders up and into the back seat. Screw the leather, V. thought—it had always had a nubuck feel anyway.

Cruising east on the open road again, having doubled back for the turn north toward Iowa City, V. kept one hand on the wheel, one thrown over the seat back as he monitored the priest's painful struggle to breathe, the bitter herbal smell of crushed foliage having blown clear when he'd powered down the windows. Iowa City. Yes. That's where this would all come to its conclusion. In Iowa City.

But it comes as no surprise—or it shouldn't—that things do not shake out that way. He's been overly optimistic.

In this version, the only one that really counts, we find V. back at

the open channel ditch, cursing and rocking against the steering wheel. And the left rear tire did spin with neither traction nor purchase, as the chassis did list forward over the incline. V. punches the transmission into forward, then reverse, forward, reverse, until he catches a whiff of the burnt-electronics smell that has, for him, always been with it a mnemonic haze of malfunction and death.

His chest heaving, V. steps from the car. He knows now: there'll be no Iowa City. The cool black night feels like a blessing. Gone is the urgency. And all at once—another blessing?—he's afforded leisure enough and occasion to gaze down upon himself as though from above, a sad little man, to be sure, leaning on the quarter panel of a leased Lexus, his damp ankles crossed, and blood on the hem of his pinstriped suit pants, the heat of the idling engine and nothing more having coaxed him out of the dark fields and into the now.

He motions to pat down his pockets for the gun and finds he's been holding it so tightly in his right hand that his fingers ache. It seems heavier—more substantial than he does himself. Not a gun guy? Really? As the warmth from the hood continues its mindless convection, V. waits; for what, he isn't sure. Be patient, he whispers. Don't assume anything yet. There's no one asking. He almost wishes there were. He would like to say, aloud—to plead his case?—that he never consciously left the Church, and have someone there to call him out for such a meaningless phrase. Someone to dirty it up with what's real. He cocks his ear against the wind. But there's nothing to hear. Just the black fields all around and the distant lights like glass beads. In this version of the story, it begins to rain. It is written, he whispers. As the first droplets slap the blacktop and plunk the hood of the car, he thinks he's never in all his life been as aware of his blood, viscous as used motor oil and forcing itself into every capillary. He's only halfway home. There's still time to figure out why he isn't leaking from every pore.

# THE BIBLE IN OUR HANDS



When Gabriel calls to tell me the good news—he made it to Jerusalem—he says, “I’m sorry.”

He lost the Bible at the border:

the Bible I gave him when we said goodbye; the border between Egypt and Israel, where he dropped his bag. I imagine it was the maroon backpack he carried all over Cairo—one nylon strap on his right shoulder.

He was sporting that bag, aviator shades, and wing-tipped shoes the day we met at All Saints Cathedral, an Anglican mission for African refugees in Egypt. After a Sudanese service one Friday, Gabriel approached me like he knew me and told me his plan: He would go to university, then home, to Southern Sudan. “Maybe you’ll teach there someday,” he told me.

Then, Gabriel showed me a photo of himself, posing in the church courtyard next to a sign: *Out of Egypt, I have called my Son* engraved in parchment-colored marble. The limestone is sculpted in the shape of an open book, resting on a palm frond. You can see the silver chain of his cross necklace resting on his collarbone.

Three years later, Gabriel and thousands of other Sudanese have crossed the Sinai by foot, trying to get to Israel. Not because the Bible says “Out of Egypt,” not because they believe Israel is their promised land: but because Egypt is not safe for refugees.

On that phone call from Jerusalem to New Haven, Gabriel tells me, “We were reading from your Bible when we stopped for rest.” He crossed the Sinai with a group of friends and strangers, Sudanese and Eritreans. I imagine them around a fire one night, looking up to see the stars, numbered as the grains of sand under their feet. I imagine Gabriel’s backpack collapsed on the ground. The Bible open in his hand: the brown vinyl-bound book, with my name embossed on the spine. I can see the whites of his fingernails flipping the gold-edged pages. “What did you read?” I ask.

“Acts of the Apostles,” he tells me. “The Holy Spirit was going to Jerusalem.”

I imagine Gabriel’s voice reading aloud from Acts: “‘In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.’”

I remember the old man who showed me the scar on his shin where



Egyptian police beat him. I can see his wood cane like a petrified snake he would slant to maneuver over the broken roads in Cairo. How could he use a cane in the sand? What dreams did he dream?

In the Sinai, Gabriel saw a vision: a road to a building and a tower—the top of Jerusalem. And when he got there, he found it, “exactly,” he told me. The King David Hotel, where he got a job as a bus boy and met Billy Graham. A far cry from the psalms of ascent. As much as I want to see Gabriel living God’s promises, he is not. As much as I want to see the kingdom—already, not yet—in his vision, I cannot.

Gabriel has given me a way to imagine the life of a refugee: how you have to keep your vital possessions on your person, how you may lose them when you have to leave a place, how you can’t go home. And I gave him my Bible, thinking he needs the scriptures more than I do: the prophecies of an appointed day, when the crooked ways are made straight, when those whom God has freed can go home with songs. I wonder if they sang in the Sinai.

When Gabriel’s story gets too hard, I think of my mother’s impersonation of the Alabama preachers we’ve heard likening our suburban lives to the Bible: “Sometimes we’re just like Israal, wand’rin’ in the wilderness.”

But we do take the power of the Exodus story seriously. When I was growing up, my mom used to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr. to me: “I may not get there with you. But I can see the Promised Land.” An odd choice of inspiration for a white woman in Alabama, but my mother is unconventional. She’s disabled—not able to come with me, not even for a visit, to the places I go, with opportunities she didn’t have, to follow

the life of the bright mind.

Now that I’ve made it, as she would say in her proud-mother way, to Yale Divinity School, I can tell a thing or two about the Bible to those sweaty, self-righteous preachers in Alabama. And maybe I’ll learn to refute the self-righteous preachers of my father’s tradition, the Coptic priests, who take Paul literally about women being silent in church.

Just as I was practicing a sermon on the metaphors of Zion in Lamentations, just as I was starting to feel at home in New Haven, I got that call from Gabriel. Hearing and retelling his story keeps me honest about the Bible: He made it to Jerusalem. But he didn’t have a metaphorical Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. They were trafficked, at the risk of torture and rape, by Bedouin smugglers they paid to get them across the Sinai. Men who pointed in the dark towards a place where they might be able to run and jump a fence—into another people’s Zion.

The Egyptian border guards shot. Gabriel’s friend—whose name he told me, whose name I don’t remember—got killed.

“He knew you,” Gabriel said. “You met after church one day.”

I don’t remember.

After losing his friend at the border, unable to look back, Gabriel was not o.k., he told me. “Sometimes I wonder why I survived.”

I imagine Gabriel’s nylon backpack lying in the desert, the wind knocked out of it, a silver chain knotted at the bottom: the cross necklace he told me he took off to protect it from the sweat and the sand. It was a gift from the Sudanese priest who baptized him, a small crucifix with no body on the cross, just bones; the lines of Jesus’ ribs like the slash marks I make with my fingernail—one for each person I’ve lost—on



the candles I burn for them.

I'm telling a convergence of stories: ribs in silver, slashes in wax. I pick up the Bible Gabriel lost on the barbed-wire line in the Sinai sand between Egypt and Israel. It was one of my five Bibles: a gift for my Coptic baptism. It was the last thing I tossed in my suitcase before leaving New York for a summer in Cairo—an afterthought, until I gave Gabriel my Bible—because I didn't know what to do for his broken heart.

I'm not one to hand out Bibles. I don't evangelize with a book of promises that seem to keep breaking. But I do try to share the good news of what we can do to keep God's promises alive: Care for the stranger, the widow, the orphan on the street; tend to the least of these; strive to love your neighbor as yourself. I fail everyday to do as Jesus preached. But some days I try to pray, as Paul told the Hebrews: "Call those to mind who are afflicted, as if you are the people who wear their bodies." I call their names to mind, but I am afraid to wear their bodies.

A book that helps me embody empathy more than the Bible is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the story of a writer and a photographer living with Alabama tenant farmers one summer to document their lives during the Depression. The writer, James Agee, does not try to redeem these people; he confesses. "[T]hey were dwelt among, investigated, spied upon, revered and loved." Agee makes a devotion of attention and strenuous description, knowing full well that his words fail: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron...A piece of the body torn out by the roots would be more to the point."

Silver ribs on a wooden cross. I can describe Gabriel's crucifix as if I'd held it in my hands. Close as I got to wearing an afflicted body. We were sitting under a tree—the only mercy, it seemed, from the Cairo sun. He told me about the mourning doves he used to follow, as they would swoop and skid across the ground in Southern Sudan, showing him the safe way to walk where there weren't landmines. He told me about watching his father die in the war, his mother drowning herself in the Nile.

I can write all this—the crucifix, the mourning doves, the deaths in Sudan—because I was not careful with my attention. Gathering the fragments of this story, I followed Gabriel all over Cairo—from the church, to long lines outside the UN office, to the apartments of his Sudanese friends living three to a room. I wrote everything down. The ragged folds of temporary residence visas, their only shreds of protection. The rubber bands around the bills they were saving, little by little, 400 dollars to get out of Egypt. The prophecy Gabriel's cousin wrote on a piece of scrap paper and carried in his shirt pocket: Isaiah saying "The Lord has founded Zion, and the poor of his people shall find refuge in it." A fragment of a promise I scribbled in my notebook.

And at the end of the summer, I did what first-world do-gooders can always do, what refugees cannot do: I went home.

Before I left Cairo, Gabriel tried to have a birthday party at All Saints. He invited all his friends and a cameraman and Paul, the British missionary who mentioned to me, almost whispering at the church coffee hour, "all the traumas Gabriel needs to heal."

I was the only one who showed up for Gabriel's birthday party. We sat on the church steps.

He said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I have to tell you the truth. It's on my heart."

"What?"

"I trust you," he said. "I can tell you everything. I keep asking God, praying about us, a lot, a lot. Can you promise me?"

"Promise what?"

"You mean you never want to get married, or you don't want to marry me?"

I told him I'm not thinking about marriage now.

"Now is not the time," he said. "I've got so many plans before I go home to Sudan, and you'll go back to America now. But we can encourage each other. It's like the Word of God: You don't take it all at once. Just promise."

I'd become part of his vision for the New Sudan. That's what happens when a Sudanese twenty-something with a prophetic sense of self

gets a crush on you. I told him I can't promise anything.

"Why?" He was looking at me, the way a child stares. "I'm an orphan," he said. "My mother killed herself."

He said it, the way I've said it, the five times I've said it, "when my mother killed herself..." But she didn't. When she tried, I was in a crib with my grandmother in the kitchen. I don't remember the sound of the gun, the months we didn't know if she would walk, if she could hold me, again. I remember—no, I've always known—her leg spasms. And the sounds she prays when the scar tissue tethers around her spine.

What can the Bible do for the traumas we need to heal? I don't know, but I want the words of God to save us from despair. I want the New Sudan like I want heaven, a home with no pain. But knowing the broken promises of Gabriel's story makes heaven strange to me. I want more than a family reunion of souls in a place with no pain. I long for a home I cannot imagine, a new heaven and a new earth, a reign of justice and peace, a way only prophets can speak—"that which an eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have come upon the heart"—a home God has prepared for us. A New Jerusalem, where our bones will flourish like grass.

When I don't have words to pray, I make slash marks on a candle. One for the part of my mother—the tennis player, the bicycle rider—who died. Another slash for Gabriel's mother. For the millions I cannot name who've died in Sudan, and for all who are lost in the Sinai, I make a vertical line; a spine for the ribs, a row of crosses.

Three wooden crosses stand over the New Horizon Cemetery where half of my family is buried in Alabama. I remember the slow lowering of each casket into the ground at the foot of a dogwood tree. The red-clay dirt, the sprays of flowers. Headstones engraved with names, birthdays, death dates. A few miles and yet worlds away, I learned of a harder way of honoring the dead. On the steps of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, I interviewed one of the Sudanese refugees who'd made it to America. When he was hurrying with thousands of other children out of Sudan, they couldn't stop long enough to bury each one who died. They would lay down a leaf, in place of a grave.

I want to make a redemption story of those leaves, to trace their veins to a root of suffering we can share, to tend the traumas we need to

heal. But if I'm honest, I cannot say we. I cannot collapse the disparities between refugees and me. Graves are not leaves. I've never had to lose my home, go without food, watch so many people die I ask why I survived.

I wonder if they left a leaf for Gabriel's mother. Does he remember?

I don't ask. I say, "I'm sorry." I give him my Bible. I go home.

\*

Gabriel's hometown is mostly ashes now. After a coup attempt in late December, a rebel group captured Bor town, burning down the huts where civilians were living. Some who were able to escape across the Nile went back after the massacre, to bury the bones.

When I heard the news, I called Gabriel in Israel. I said, "I'm so sorry about what happened in Bor."

"It's a disaster," he told me. His family home was destroyed. His sister's husband was killed. Gabriel has to go home, to get her out of South Sudan. "She's the only sister I've got."

I asked how I can pray for them.

"Peace, first of all. We don't know if that will happen," he said. "But God can do something." Gabriel also asked me to pray that he can get a flight out of Israel as soon as possible. He'd been arrested in Tel Aviv for not having a visa to be in Israel; he was released on the condition that he leave the country within seven days.

"Is there anything in the Bible that is helping you?" I asked. I was hoping he would speak a prophecy, tell me of the day when God will pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. I wanted Gabriel's faith to help my flesh rest in hope.

"Any scriptures that are encouraging you?"

"Honestly, no," he told me. "I just got out from jail yesterday."

A captive has been set free. Gabriel is going home to another broken promise. What will God do with the bones?





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