

Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



Issue One

June 2019

Table of Contents

Editor's Note

Poetry

Ericka Clay
Elaine Wilburt
Amy Coppe
Carl Palmer
Gopal Lahiri
Joris Soeding
Victoria Crawford
Amy Nemecek
April Ojeda

Prose

Lorette C. Luzajic
Laura Arciniega
Alec Solomita
Carla Durbach

Art

Jim Stoner
Lorette C. Luzajic
Tamayo Muto
Philip Abbott

Photography

Ann Privateer
Lorette C. Luzajic

Editor's Note



"Eve and the Serpent" by Veronica McDonald

A bit of testimony: during a time in my life when I didn't know God, I felt a desperate need inside of me that I couldn't quite explain. I wanted there to be a "good." But, I didn't want placation and platitudes. More than the "good," I wanted truth, no matter how gritty or bleak – and I imagined *all* truth was gritty and bleak.

At the time, I thought *the* truth was that once we die we go into the ground, and our minds cease to exist. "Good" was subjective, and ultimately "good" didn't matter because nothing in life truly mattered; One day the sun will run out of energy, the Earth will die, and everything that anyone has ever done will be forgotten, forever. Death always had the last word.

Or so I believed. For a long time.

But something reached out to me. It reached out to me through the things with which I often distracted myself – literature, movies, TV, and art. Through shows like *Game of Thrones*, it made me realize that certain human behaviors truly disgusted me. It imparted on my heart that righteousness, honor, and "doing the right thing even when it's hard" actually mattered, though I didn't know why it mattered. Through a "Cain and Abel" depiction in a *Swamp Thing* comic, it made me contemplate evil and the afterlife. Superheroes and heroic protagonists made me long for a hero in real life to save us all from ourselves. Many authors I read used themes from the Bible for the basis of their stories and for the characters I loved. I couldn't pinpoint why these stories and characters spoke to me the deepest, why these stories were best, except that they fed my desire for the "good" that I knew didn't exist.

When I wasn't a Christian, I was drawn to the "good," and to what was "right." I was drawn to self sacrifice. I was drawn to people who weren't scared of death. I was drawn to people and themes from the Bible. I was drawn to hope, and honesty and truth. Though I didn't know it all those times, I was being drawn to Jesus Christ. He was softening my heart, and my hope is that He softens hearts through the poetry, prose, and artwork of this journal.

Here you'll find characters in the throes of sin, like the adulterous couple in Alec Solomita's "Marie." You'll find doubt and struggles of faith and the flesh speaking out of the poems of Ericka Clay, Amy Coppe, and Amy Nemecek. You'll find hope in the simple gestures of Carl Palmer's "maestro" and the knitter in Victoria Crawford's "40," and in the broken calls from the poems of April Ojeda. Here you'll see transformation in Gopal Lahiri's dreamer, Joris Soeding's "spectator," and Carla Durbach's professor. You'll find creative longings for Christ and visions of truth in the work of Elaine Wilburt, Lorette C. Luzajic, and Laura Arciniega. You'll find characters that know they've been saved, people still in the dark, and people who are attracted to the light.

I hope you'll find something for you.

Thank you to our contributors: the wonderful writers mentioned above and the talented artists/photographers Philip Abbott, Lorette C. Luzajic, Tamayo Muto, Ann Privateer, and Jim Stoner.

Thank you to all who submitted work, and thank you for reading our inaugural issue.

Veronica McDonald

Editor-in-chief

Veronica McDonald is a writer, poet, artist, and editor/founder of *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Her work has appeared in *Inwood Indiana Press*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Five on the Fifth*, and *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*, among others. She became a born-again Christian in July 2016 when Jesus saved her from anxiety, depression, and a nihilistic worldview. Find her at VeronicaMcDonaldArt.com.

Ericka Clay

You've Come Undone

There's a bar top
where my feet danced
and vats of vodka
that my throat drank
and tons of men
my hips danced
against
and the cool devilish
calling of a fallen
world in the
crooks of my elbows
and swing of my hips
and never a day
goes by that I
don't think about
the vodka,
the dancing,
the sweet smell
of smoke entering
a soul,
but that's only
because I'm human.
That's only because my
eyes see only
what's in front of me
and not the quiet
God-like pull
numbing the canvas,
wiping it clean.

Like a Green Olive Tree

I don't know a lot
about other women,
but are they twinned
in the mirror,
eyes combing through
every year this or that
just didn't work out
but thoughtfully left
its initials under an eye?
The other day, I caught
my photo from years ago

and thought about You,
what it's like to take in
such a magnificent creature
although, I admit, I have
no wings or a lion's head
that might turn some heads.
But what about now, day
in, another day out,
my face still stuck to a piece
of glass, my face simultaneously
falling through cracked earth,
and a man still loving me,
calling me beautiful,
even though the voice
in my head rolls its eyes?
Can you love a little
lump of clay, crumbling
from time's breath,
from the stubborn this's
and that's that all had
other plans?
Can you love a "me"
that no longer knows
where to look.

Hearts Carved From Rock

There is
always
a
tiny version
of love
we give to
those we don't
love.
A guilt-driven band-aid,
for all the times
your moments
together don't
add
up.
And I don't
want to do that to You
or to anyone
but sometimes I think
my heart is carved
too deep from the rock.

And I don't think I can love
You
until I remember
You're the one
who carved
it.

Ericka Clay is the author of *Dear Hearts* and *Unkept*. She is a former atheist turned Christian homeschooling mama. The pigs have apparently flown.

Elaine Wilburt

Scenes From Easter in Germany

I.

Like the Israelites
through the Red Sea, we
raced north
on a thin ribbon
of autobahn
through walls
of flowers, golden
breakers fleeing
to either side
of us,
seeking the razor edge
of the blue horizon
of that cloudless spring.

II.

From the scrubby features in the drab bark
of the tree in the square, two knots
(the right eye larger, swollen as if
blackened in a fight) squinted,
unseeing, at us.

Frowsy down budded in tufts
on the tangle of branches
like mangy patches of hairs
sprouting after cancer,
and satin-tethered eggs swayed in arcs,
lustrous pendulums ticking,
“Time enough. Time enough.”

III.

In the sanctuary, pressing
foreign words and phrases into the familiar story,
I found Mary Magdalene
at the gaping tomb,
wailing,
grasping her sides,
failing to stanch
wave upon wave of sobs,
salty streaks carving
riverbeds on the maps of her cheeks.

A stench of third-day decay loitered
like retreating tide clutching the shore.

When she bent to look inside,
seated at the head and feet
of the emptiness
where his body
had been,
two angels who
once had probably cried,
“Peace to men on earth,”
now asked, “Woman,
why are you weeping?”

And the gardener asked her, too. Then
as Mary stared again at the tomb,
she heard Jesus call her name,

so afterward she would say,
“I have seen the Lord.”

IV.
Standing shoulder to shoulder,
we offered our hands
to one another, to all,
“Peace be with you.”

“And also with you.”

Needlework

With whirring wings
beaten from sight,
the ruby-throated
hummingbird
hovers, suspended,
between earth
and flight, its
hypodermic
beak and flicking
tongue drawing
a quick sample
of red buckeye
nectar, leaving
sticky pollen
behind.

How
does it feel
to stop between

two worlds
through force of will?
Waiting for the doctor's
call.

On Purpose

It keeps the bottle's contents at e-
quilibrium until release.
The wires are set and screwed down turn

upon turn; it will on its opening
reveal a new pressure-born crown
of scars to mark a spongy head

with four harsh, deep, unyielding wounds.
In just an instant, pop! The wine
will pour; the cork, be tossed away.

Elaine Wilburt graduated from Middlebury College and lives in Maryland with her husband and children. Her poems have appeared in *The Cresset*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Wales Haiku Journal*, *Otata*, and *Bones* among others; devotionals, in *The Word in Season*. Forthcoming poetry will appear in *Bible Advocate*, *Edify Fiction*, and *The Avenue*.

Amy Coppe

Immolation

It would be a lie to pretend it's simple devotion
That drives my lips to utter
"Take my life"

You said it best: those who love their lives will lose
Them, while losers like me
Take the proverbial cake

I'm not just imbibing principle, either, tipsy with
The evangelical fast crowd, ice shrinking as it
Takes the heat

Pragmatism fells me to my face; I know
I can't make it without you
Taking away this filth

And I know from drawing near: unseen
Impurities combust, burn and scar
Holiness is a blinding white heat

Retaining Wall

One emerges, one day, blinking in garden sunlight:
What had been a retaining wall now

Retaining no form, function: Stone upon stone
Piled without order.

It is this way with lives. One day, truth emerges,
Light shafts through stubborn blinds

Intruding upon the idiot fictions,
Stone idols of the heart, showing

Trust to be a bankrupt temple,
Sullied structure: nothing to place one's weight on.

What wall what wall will retain
This wail this wail at betrayal

After the March for Life

I don't find it easy to be;
Open eyes shipwreck trust.
Plans of the ax-wielders to
Lay order waste, collapse
Homes to driftwood, siphon away
The weakest and dismember
Tender beauty in bloodthirsty
Rebellion against life and its
Lovers, are plain as street signs.
For linking arms, igniting bowls of
Incense, and raising to the King
This boundless grief and calls for
Merciful justice; for standing fast
Against the rot and ruin they force on
the undiscerning, they despise. I
Don't find it easy to be, loving those
Who hate that I am found in You,
Incurring their condescending wrath and
Hearing with my conch shell ears only
Simple rushes of Your silence.

Amy Coppe is a Christian mother of five who is a grant writer by trade.

Carl Palmer

Maestro

His thin crippled hand
conducts orchestra music
from an FM radio station
too loud for the room,

too quiet to drown sounds
of the mechanical pump,
beeps of his heart monitor
and sobs from his audience.

Carl “Papa” Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, Virginia, lives in University Place, Washington. He is retired from the military and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enjoying life now as “Papa” to his grand descendants and being a Franciscan Hospice volunteer. Carl is a Pushcart Prize and Micro Award nominee. MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever!

Gopal Lahiri

Invisible Target

Eyes focused on the horizon, I could not rise
From the empty beach and count my footprints.

A diagonal swath of galaxy path and my life
Shouting and dancing inside along the shallow coral line

A round moon rose behind me and lit up the
All-encompassing sea like a shining silver sheet.

Devils could not come out from the dark and
Drag me on the sand mound in sneaky silence,

So tiny one could miss it and not even know
The sea could push to the deep water with a light swell,

Half- presence and half-absence of the all mighty
Wanted to steer me towards the invisible target,

And all this before the cardinal points of the island
And long before the bell woke me for dawn.

Gopal Lahiri was born and lives in Kolkata, India. He is a bilingual poet, writer, editor, critic and translator and published in Bengali and English language. He has had nine volumes of poems in English and seven volumes in Bengali, and has edited one anthology of poems and published one translation work.

Joris Soeding

Of Shift As Spectator

Erasure poem of Mary Shelley's story, "Transformation."

the secrets of Genoa remember my lives
mortal motives left under a rock
I was eleven, arrogant
pardoned in my lands of every pleasure
I was lurking by the display of lovers
a brief whirlwind, desperate, and lawless
discern the prayers I muttered in the distorted breeze
manifestations forgive me as guests part
I hesitated, my body stolen
beside me hovered wants, this change

Joris Soeding's most recent book of poetry is *Home in Nine Moons* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2018). Soeding's writing has appeared in publications such as *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Night Garden Journal*, and *Red River Review*. He is a 7th/8th grade Social Studies teacher in Chicago, where he resides with his wife, son, and daughter.

Victoria Crawford

40

Forsake chocolate, pizza, sugar
forty days, forty nights
sounds like snap fingers
and it is over
counted day by day
hours of deprivation endless
whine about self-sacrifice
Lent—I've done them all.

Forty orphans nearby
abandoned lambs—
mission church springs up
to share Easter joys
volunteers for the plan
I get knitting 40 baskets
my Lenten task, time donation
during my busy days
one a night

Row counts, color patterns
forty slows evenings as yarn
flows through my fingers
stitch by stitch, knit-purl
Jesus in the wilderness
Noah afloat
Israelites' desert years

My hands tire, but
tightly knit baskets
sacrifice gives time reflection
a gift for the children
and this knitter.

Day Made

This is the day—
faint gleams of first light
cuckoo rouses, cries ko-el
night bloomers, moon-white,
scent fades

a minute more of sleep
the hard bed disallows

eyes open
to the door's sunlit square
of awaken

ko-el, ko-el resounds
to the world of morning
radiant, full
—that the Lord has made.

Poet **Victoria Crawford** currently lives in Thailand and attends a small mission church inclusive of many nationalities. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Time of Singing*, *Parousia*, *The Lyric*, *Postcard Poems and Prose* and anthologies like *Missing Persons: reflections on Dementia*.

Amy Nemecek

It Is Well

Peace like a river eludes me.

This pilgrim heart pants hard
after water brooks, pauses

to refresh body and soul
by some rain-swollen stream.

Drizzled droplets accumulate
on cattails and cottonwoods,

elongate to tears that land
in slick ripples and plump

to rings, slip over rocks,
diffuse into freshet springs.

I'll content myself with a creek.

Hope Deferred

I arrive late with no lesson plan,
two things a teacher must never do,
yet I find myself perpetually
unprepared this divisive November.
How long, O Lord?

My Sunday school students teeter
on metal chairs around a folding
table, paper cutout boredom
scissored in their eyes.
Will you look away forever?

My sentry heart grows footsore
watching for the dawn.

Gracias, Lucinda

for the children of Lirio de los Valles

Joy in pigtails and faded purple shorts
takes my hand and pulls me to the

hard-packed haze that passes for a pitch.
Lucinda's too small and I'm too old
to play *fútbol* with *los gringos*,
so we stand along the sidelines,
tossing a spongy ball between us.
Lucinda has little to call her own;
no shirt, no shoes, no parents,
nothing but a *nombre*, three saffron syllables
that summon sunshine in her smile.
Lucinda spots a bit of *rojo* on the ground,
plucks it with thumb and forefinger,
scours the dirt for more discarded beads.
Animated by chiaroscuro chatter,
her caramel eyes insist I help string
dusty handfuls of color on twine
scavenged from scraggly mesquite.
Lucinda schools me in the Spanish spectrum,
corrects my flat pronunciation.
Flourishing a finished bracelet,
she ties a half hitch around my wrist,
encircles me with friendship
in this home where patience nurtures,
mercy heals, justice and peace embrace.

Amy Nemecek lives in Michigan with her husband, son, and two cats. Her poetry appears in *Windhover*, *Time of Singing*, *Stirring*, *3288 Review*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Snapdragon*, *Ancient Paths*, and *Indiana Voice Journal*. She works as a book editor and serves on the planning committee for the Breathe Writers Conference. When Amy isn't working with words, she enjoys walking along country roads and traveling with her family.

April Ojeda

Black Pearl

A nameless fool stole a treasure
That didn't belong to him.
True, it was no great beauty, but it was
My own, and my only, pearl.
He took it by force, with careless greed,
Ripped right out of my clumsy hands.
He never even looked back as he
Passed me by,
Just a rough grab and run like hell
In the dark.

He didn't even want it,
not really,
Only the quick, the hollow fix
It afforded him.
And then?
And then he rounded a corner
And threw the damned thing out
With the trash he carried.
So there I stood, stunned and silent,
A nameless fool—a graceless girl.

It's my secret now, my black pearl
Buried treasure lost to space and time.
But treasure, however hidden, is never
Without a map — or a hunter.
And it calls to You in broken hallelujahs—
Find me.
Bring light, bring life
For fools like him,
For lost girls like me.

Black Apple

the black apple
you ate for the first time today
and thought
intoxicating and earthy
like a sweet southern wine,
is also favored
by maggots, wormy and gray,
and likely to dry-rot
without some divine

interference
of an Other to cultivate life;
a faithful hand to grant
sustenance and shield,
to foster fruit that might yield
to you
its juices and flesh
in a pleasing sacrifice.

God of Hope

glory to God in the highest
for the imperfect and the strange,
for the unbalanced, bent, and cracked,
for the unworthy and the scarred,
for all things broken, left behind,
forgotten, refused, tossed aside.

for such as these, on bended knees,
the well of Hope springs infinite.

April Ojeda is a teacher and writer who lives in the Texas Panhandle. She writes poetry as a means of prayer and of processing daily life. She enjoys exposing students to new adventures in reading and writing and finds her greatest inspiration in the outdoors.

Lorette C. Luzajic

The Skull Cathedral

The second time I stood at Calvary, it was literal. I was actually there. I took it all in, the scraggly rock that looked like a skull if you tilted your head to a certain angle. If you suspended your disbelief.

I thought it had likely looked like its namesake, Golgatha, the place of the skull, before 2000 years of greedy pilgrim hands scrabbling stone, pocketing souvenirs of place. I imagined clawing for a slice of rock I could hide in my palm, wearing it against my breast like a scapular, the way other German women had worn the stones that Hitler trod.

I understood the pull of symbolism, the power of a talisman or relic to the human soul's want for meaning. In the days before he died, when they were falling out like loosened piano keys, I asked my father for his tooth. I wanted that small stone, to bring him to me after he disappeared.

But here at the only place in history that life had victory over death, the legend of it was a hard sell. I'd told Dad once, during the long conversations he took with me patiently in the year after I became an atheist, *Pops, I respect the story. I see its mythological value, I see its beauty. Metaphorically, I'm moved.*

But I find it a hard pill to swallow, that a man rose from the dead.

My father never got frantic about our salvation, or the even more pressing issues like the addiction that had taken my mind and my soul and my heart, and my husband, too. My father gave me time to heal, and he carried his grief heavy and close to his heart, in secret, like those stones.

It IS difficult to accept, he said, finally. Even so, everyone accepts that 7 billion people rose from the dead, all by themselves, so anything is possible.

This was the conversation I pondered as our tour group to Israel filed into the cavern that had probably been Christ's tomb. Giant buses roared in and out of the concrete circle that was an ancient site of Roman executions, hissing and heaving through through the heat. My mind wandered to the places of the world where men and women guilty of nothing were still put to death every day. It struck me as I waited my turn to enter that those places were not far away, many just a few miles.

My father stepped inside with Betty, and I lowered my head and went in after them. It was cool and dim and there was nothing to see but yellow and gray stone worn smooth by history. I didn't know that Daddy did not have three years left to live. No one did.

I couldn't find my way back to belief in time for the Eucharist in the garden that followed, but I wanted to take part in it anyway, to consume that bread of life and drown out all the death inside of me.

I couldn't shake the words nailed above the entrance when I emerged back into daylight from the empty earth:

He is not here, He is risen.

Cloud Water

Just before he knew he was sick, my father took me to a dinner theatre in a barn to see the Christian Blackwood Brothers do Elvis. The roast beast was blander than British, and the horseradish ran out before I got to the line, but the gospel according to Elvis raised the rafters.

I'd never had a thing for this velvet-throated bird: his pout was pretty but I never was convinced by all those sequins and spangles. Just didn't feel his soul in all of that. Turned out, that was true, sort of. The pomade and the girls and the bright lights had their allure, but they say all the King really wanted to do was sing about the King. When he did, all that was missing came together. His heart in his voice. All night, just him and his band, when the hordes had gone home.

A woman in the powder room mirror at intermission was fixing her lobster-purple lipstick. She had Indian eyes but her hair was so pale you could see through it. She was talking to a friend in a cubicle that I could only see by some pointy toed boots peeping out and the jeans around her ankles. The disembodied voice from the toilet was saying something about Elvis, about how he once saw Stalin in the clouds, before the apparition turned into Jesus.

"And the good Lord said, Elvis, behold I come to you as living water," she was saying, and I could almost feel the rush of the rapture in the air with the flushing of the toilet. The sound was like a waterfall in Eden in the small stalled walls.

After my father closed his eyes for the last time, I came across the brochure for the barn show where we'd been. I pictured the bales of hay we rolled past on that blue and shiny day. The river tumbling under the clouds was a black ribbon between sky and earth, like the innards of a cassette tape slinging south through fields and branches. In my memory, I could hear Elvis lowing sweetly from those clouds, saw Daddy ascending through the pick-up truck to run towards him.

Upon Unwrapping a Handmade Stuffed Camel Toy

How do you gracefully unravel candy cane tissue, pry it loose from a crocheted camel? It is Christmas, and our glasses are full of cheer on the corner of a bar. I am wedged in between Karen and her husband. Blessed, with besties. There has been already chocolate, and chocolate tea, and Merlot, pressed back into a gift bag, pushed down with our snowy boots under the counter. Now it is this, a hand-crocheted camel, my favourite of all the beasts. Right here, the knitted dromedary is absurd and beautiful and the best gift I have ever received.

I have built myself into something stronger, I have reached past death and darkness for light and life and I have disposed all those demons that possessed me. But face to face with this bactrian boy, I crumple for a moment into tears. We had emerged, thirty or so moments before, from a candlelit carol service, where I sat dry eyed through two hours of exquisite sonatas celebrating the greatest story ever told. The Magnificat, the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the old man in front of me, straight out of Herman, with pop out ears and sparse thick hairs growing from them, singing his heart out far from the key.

Through all this, I held my composure. Oh, yes, I readily confess it, for awhile now, I've prided myself on feeling nothing. I have found salvation in negation. But here in my hands is the same love that crocheted a pale blue owl for the baby daughter of a friend who had been estranged. Here is that same nativity story, two millennia after the fact, this toothy, gypsy queen of the desert that carried wiser men and frankincense. The story, knit by Christ and Karen, love manifest without question for a sinner like me.

Lorette C. Luzajic is a Toronto, Canada based visual artist, poet, and founding editor of *The Ekphrastic Review*, a journal devoted entirely to writing inspired by art. She has four poetry collections, and has been widely published in print and online journals, including *Cultural Weekly*, *KYSO Flash*,

Rattle, ArtAscent, Everyday Poetry, Geez Magazine, United Church's Wonder Cafe, Peacock Journal, and more. Her artwork has been exhibited locally, across the USA, throughout Mexico, and in North Africa. Visit her at www.mixedupmedia.ca.

Laura Arciniega

January at the Bay of Rainbows

My son was the first toddler on the Moon. He visited the *Oceanus Procellarum* and learned the Milky Way.

When he came back to Newark Bay, he said, “Our bay is really the Bay of Rainbows. Tell me the story of the galaxy—not the Milky Way.”

I said, “Ten thousand years ago, I left the Sugar Shack and went to work in Hodges Chapel at Beeson Divinity School, where my heart first palpitated. On my birthday, men came to tune the organ and left the door unlocked. I clomb inside, and up in the pipes I saw the galaxy, *El Unicornio Azul*. Then I saw a purple planet within it, then a water bear in its core. I was one thousand times smaller than she; we were the Sun and UY Scuti. I smiled. Water bears don’t smile, but they have a way of flexing and unflexing their uppermost claws that shows pleasure. She flexed and unflexed.

“We didn’t speak with voices; I flicked the pipes and she sent thrums through my ribcage. Her name was Hosanna. She told me about her home galaxy: ‘Our planets are birthstones and they’re *alive*: in their tropospheres, rainbow hurricanes swim, spice deserts grow, and my children live.

“‘We have one star: a California poppy. She does the work; every morning, she orbits through the jewelry box of planets, blooming and polishing them with light just right to drowse to. When she sleeps at night, the planets wake. The birthstones agree there’s no one as generous as the Poppy. That’s why God planted her in the stellar nursery seven billion years ago—to show us dying and rising again. He speaks the gospel to us through the Poppy.

“‘I live in the cinnamon desert of *Amatista*. I left home one day to look for life in the many-verse—”

“*Mani*-verse?” my son asked.

“No, baby, *many*, more than one. Hosanna thrummed, ‘To leave a planet, we burrow toward the core. When I reached the thing in my galaxy that’s most like your Sun, I opened my eyes and saw the inside of the organ in Hodges Chapel. It was the year Orgues Létourneau built the organ, your year 1995. I waited in wordless prayer. Today I heard your shoes tapping on the marble, so I thrummed. It pleases me to find life outside of *El Unicornio Azul*. It pleases me that your kind are still here.’

“I flicked the pipes, ‘But my kind, humans, break things they find. They plant Superfund sites in New Jersey, they dump feces in space so it burns like shooting stars, and they want to throw nuclear waste in the Mariana Trench so it subducts with the Pacific Plate. Humans take away the children of other humans.’

“Hosanna unflexed all thirty-two of her claws. I bowed my head in repentance. She thrummed, ‘That’s why God hid us here in the organ.’

“‘Please tell me your creation story,’ I said.

“She flexed and unflexed her uppermost claws. ‘You’ve read it. I am the ‘*Hosanna*’ humans shouted at the Triumphal Entry. God first considered me in Psalm 118, and when humans shouted in praise of Jesus, they gave me birth. Afterward, he carried me to *Amatista*, where I’ve lived since.’

“I asked her why.

“‘You’ve told me about humans; maybe he didn’t want humans to destroy me. Maybe he wanted to hide away a bit of the praise they gave to Jesus so they couldn’t break it.’

“But no one even knows you’re there. What good does it do if you’re hidden away?” I said stupidly. I was only twenty-one.

“Hosanna unflexed subtly. My stupidity grieved her. ‘God makes his creatures for his enjoyment and for their enjoyment. He doesn’t make them for humans to dissect.’

“Then I cried an *Oceanus Procellarum* that washed me out of the organ, through the nave, out of the narthex, and into the profane.

“I woke up the next morning on Odum Lane. I couldn’t remember anything after the *Oceanus Procellarum*. I panicked. Worried that Hosanna would be gone from the organ, I left your daddy sleeping and ran down the hill to the chapel. The south side door was open, so I burst through it. I was so young and so stupid.

“Another chapel attendant was giving a tour. I crouched in the apse behind a pew before anyone saw me. When they left, I tried to sneak into the organ, but the door was locked. I’d been afraid Hosanna would leave; I hadn’t considered that God wouldn’t let me back in.”

“Why didn’t he let you in?”

“Maybe because I wasn’t right inside. Maybe because I wasn’t ready.”

“Did you ever see her again?” my son de-rhotacized.

“Yes, last January, ten thousand years later on the bulwark at Newark Bay. You slept in your stroller and I slept awake, snow on my face. I woke somewhere else. It was dark and warm and *alive*: the womb of *Amatista*. Hosanna thrummed, ‘I’ll take you up through the mantle and crust.’”

“What did you say, Mom?”

“I was ten grains of sugar wiser this time. I said nothing.

“Hosanna and I ascended. When we cracked the twelve-foot-thick jewel-crust, I almost cried another *Oceanus Procellarum*. It was the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“More beautiful than our Bay of Rainbows?”

“A little. A Spanish blue hurricane approached us. She was waterless and made of sugar—a sugarcane. She lifted us up and handed us to her *Prunus* ‘Kanzan’ mothercane in the tropopause, who laid us down on the bougainvillea ground. The quartz was hard and cool on my feet, bare now though it was January at the Bay of Rainbows. Hosanna and I walked. When we reached dunes that were golden-brown, sweet and spicy in my soul, my stomach was so hungry that I almost cried another *Oceanus Procellarum*. Still, I said nothing. Then I saw that walking my bare feet through the cinnamon fed me. I learned to wait.

“I could hear the Poppy singing in her sleep somewhere in space, but the troposphere was silent except for the thrumming of Hosanna’s children. In the silence was the Word as God spoke it.¹ I saw then that *Amatista* and the other planets of *El Unicornio Azul* were not just jewels—they were hearts palpitating, fed by the golden light-blood of the Poppy.

“Hosanna thrummed to me that even though it was easy for me to leave the Sugar Shack when I was twenty-one, it would be hard for me to return ten thousand years later, in the year of the Holy Fire.

“I contemplated this for ten months. I contemplated asking a question about it. I contemplated our first meeting in the organ. I contemplated my stupidity. I contemplated whether, after I had questioned her hiddenness, Hosanna thought about the billions of years when everything existed before God made humans on Earth. If I was her, I’d have stripped a stupid youth bare: *What about Titanis walleri?* *Micropachycephalosaurus?* *Cygnus falconeri?* *Paraceratherium?* *What about Arambourgia*

philadelphiae? Did God make them for humans, those who lived and wept and joyed and died before he ever made a single cell of your body? God did not even tell you about them in the Bible! But she didn't say any of that; she was sweet to me even though I was so young and so stupid. Hosanna was truly a bit of praise born in the mouth of someone speaking to Jesus.

"I decided against asking. Instead, I looked into Hosanna's eyes. One palpitation later, I saw up into a blue-green singularity in yet another galaxy, the one we call *Ouranós*; two palpitations later, I saw up into the pipes of the organ; three palpitations later, I saw up into the beloved sass of our Bay of Rainbows."

"You came back?"

"I came back."

"Mama, I met Hosanna on the Moon today. She took me to Orangecrest. She told me that it's the year of the Holy Fire, so it's time to go back."

An *Oceanus Procellarum* filled my eyes. Hosanna was right. It was going to be hard. Harder than the bougainvillea quartz. I asked my son, "Why?"

He answered, "That's just how life is."

ⁱ Johannes Tauler, *Sermons*, trans. Maria Shradý (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 36, 38.

Laura Arciniega's work has appeared in *Rascal Journal*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *is this up*, *FIVE:2:ONE Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in Southern California with her husband and son. You can find her online at lauraaliciaarciniega.wordpress.com and on Twitter @LauraAArciniega.

Alec Solomita

Marie

I.

Hung up on the ball and chain this morning before coming to Mom's. Paul told me she'd be *out*. I hate hanging up like that. I know how it feels. If you're in a good mood — busy, centered — it's like I give a shit, right? But if you're feeling bad, it's like dying. It's personal. You say hello and they hang up on you like they want to hang up on you and nobody else. Not to mention she's not a nitwit. She's going to wonder.

The buds are opening on some of the trees. I hate March. When you're in the sun, it's spring and then you walk by a building or a big doorway and winter's waiting for you there. The buds are fools. They come out in February or March and then get sandbagged by the cold.

In the winter, I love the cold. You don't expect as much in the winter. There's less of everything — light, heat, color, life. And that's fine with me. It's a matter of expectations. Paul's studio seems cozy in the winter. You don't feel cheated that you can't open the windows, open the blinds, go for a walk. It seems just right that the whole world is in one little lovemaking room. One chunk of foam on the floor wrapped in a sheet and covered by an old comforter. The black deco standing lamp with the bonnet shade. Folding chairs. A candle. A space heater. And all the liquor you could want, and, of course, the little pipe and his stash.

And the boom box and us. He makes tapes of his favorite songs, his "latest enthusiasms" he calls them, raising his black eyebrows and winking a blue eye, and I think, am I one of them there things? How he finds time I really can't say. A wife, a child, a mistress, a — like he always says — "high powered" job. And then he finds time to make tapes of Roy Orbison and Emmy Lou Harris. Turning on the boom box and pacing around the small floor, he explains to me how country and blues became rock 'n' roll or how old Ray Charles was when he went blind. Cute, like a little boy teacher.

He always does a high powered job on me, very proud of that, he is, supporting himself with his arms for so long I can see his biceps developing in the candlelight, Talking, talking, talking. Talking about me. And then when we're finally done, and he brings the ashtray and the vodka, tiptoeing past the space heater, naked and drowsy, we lie together and he's talking, talking, talking about him.

II.

Johnny and Verne grab for the phone like they're still kids, not grownups waiting for their mother to die. It's a tie. They're both holding the receiver down and looking at each other like arm wrestlers. I'm wondering if it's Paul for me. He was supposed to call an hour ago. They hold on for three rings.

"Boys, boys," Dad says quietly and they both remember where they are and let go. On the fourth ring I pick it up. It's Paul. I can hardly hear him. So I go into the kitchen and get the phone there. But I still can't hear him hardly. It's his end.

"Where are you?" I say.

"In a bar. They put the phone right next to the goddamn T.V. I can't hear you."

"Find another phone," I say.

“You’re right,” he says and hangs up.

I sit at the small table waiting for Paul to find another phone. I should straighten up, the kitchen’s a mess, but I don’t have the energy. Have to water the plants anyway, all four of them. And on the long, yellow table are two beautiful flower arrangements, looking beautiful against the yellow wood. Ann sent one. I don’t know who sent the other, that sexy flower *Bird of Paradise*.

Even with all that noise, Paul’s voice got me going. I saw him in his raincoat in the cheap bar. The charcoal raincoat. The back of his neck, his hair just cut, the line of black hair sharp against that white black-Irish skin. The strong fingers of his left hand tapping on the mahogany bar, one of them with the thick wedding ring, the other hand holding the phone, breathing into my ear.

The kitchen is full of color. Dad’s new things are up on the wall. A painting of the old house in April, the lilacs blooming in lavender smudges that seep into the white of the big front porch. That’s above the long table, blocked a little by the fake Tiffany lamp hanging from the ceiling. The wall’s filled with paintings, mostly by us. Even Mom was painting lately, before she went to bed for good — sleeping, moaning, sleeping — a couple of her crazy fruit still-lives jumping out of the frames, limes like watermelons or watermelons like limes. An early one of Dad’s, a nude with thick black strokes for eyes and nose, looks like a Russian icon of the Madonna.

The phone rings in my hand, making me jump.

“Hello.”

“Baby.”

“I’ve got it!” I yell to the living room and Verne calls back, “Okay, baby.” Damn.

“Hi,” I say, “Where are you now?”

“In Government Center across from City Hall. It’s snowing.”

“I know. Isn’t it weird?”

“I miss you,” he calls into the wind.

“I miss you.”

“What are you wearing?”

I laugh, “You’re a panic.”

“When can I see you? I have tonight.”

“Tonight’s okay, I think. My shift is tomorrow night.”

He’s smart enough not to ask how Mom is.

“I hung up on your wife again today.”

“Oh, shit,” he says.

“I hate to do that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What time?” I say.

“What?”

“What time?”

“Eight.”

"That's late. Do we have to leave at ten?"

"I'm afraid so," he says.

"Okay."

"Don't be angry," he says.

"I'm not."

There actually is a copy of a Russian icon of the Madonna in the kitchen, right by the slip of wall between the window and the sink. On the other side are photographs of Verne and Tess, with Verne looking straight into the camera, holding the baby like she's an Oscar.

"Well, what are you then?"

"Pregnant," I say.

The phone clicks and the recording comes on . . . "or your call will automatically be terminated."

"Damn," he says.

"You got a quarter?"

"I'm looking."

I feel like a jerk. I know it's an asshole way to tell him. I don't know why I did it like that.

"Ah," he says. The coin clicks in. "What did you say? It sounded like you said you were pregnant?"

"I did."

There's a long pause. "Get out of the snow," I said.

III.

Who would think I'd get to know this little section of warehouses in the butt end of Allston so well? Through the third red light on North Harvard Street, after the bridge, and then a left, and then past his building and around the corner. And usually the bag of chicken wings or roast beef subs, or take-out Chinese. Not tonight. No time for dinner tonight.

The heavy metal front door is wedged open with a brick which I hurt my toe kicking back into the dim, stone vestibule. It clangs. The whole building clangs. Inside I push the big door shut. When I turn to climb the iron stairs, I see him sitting on the first landing in his suit and socks, his shoes hanging from the fingers of one hand, his tie undone, his teeth gleaming. He gets up and starts up the stairs ahead of me.

"Come visit my tree house," he says.

I follow on the clanging steps, circling round and round. By the fourth floor, I've caught up with him and we go in the apartment together. There are candles lit on the picnic table he stole from a park last summer. I can see the blue evening through the spaces between the blinds, which are pulled all the way down but tilted upward so the sky comes through. His laptop sits in the corner on the floor by the foam mattress. He stands in front of me and looks me in the eye.

"I don't feel like talking yet," I say.

So he goes over to the industrial-size sink.

"Can I get you a drink?" He says. "I was just making one for myself." Then he turns in the jumping

candlelight and smiles nervously. "Or are you not supposed to drink already?"

"I'll have a martini," I say and start to cry. No sobbing, just the tears pouring out. I swore I wouldn't but I can't help it, and once I've started I can't stop. Now I'm going to get red and swollen, and he's going to get all agitated and maybe start yelling because I've made him feel guilty. But he doesn't yell. He comes over and holds me.

"It's gonna be okay, baby," he whispers in my ear. The whisper is moist and the two little bursts of air that "baby" make start to get me warmed up. God, I hate him right now.

"I can't believe it," I say, "I'm pregnant. My mother's dying. Everything sucks. I'm sick of life. I'm sick of coming here to goddamn Allston once a week. I'm sick of everything."

I back away, take off my coat and peek through the blinds at the long-haired, gray cat who sleeps in the street.

Paul's chilling the glasses and stirring the drinks and looking in his briefcase for his little bottle of olives. It's not until the drinks are ready and we're sitting on opposite benches over the picnic table, after we say cheers and take our first sip of the cold vodka that he says, "Are you sure?"

I nod.

"I love you," he says.

I nod again.

"I know what you're thinking," he says, "that and two bucks will get you a cup of coffee."

"That and three hundred will get me an abortion," I say.

"Oh," he says, like he hadn't thought of abortion. Another goddamn Catholic. I can't believe I'm with someone like Dad. Goddamn Catholics. Revering life. Damnit. He's already finished his drink. He gets up.

"I tink I'll take a wee bit more," he brogues, "And you? A freshenin' lass?"

"No thanks."

When he sits down again, he puts his finger under the loosened knot of his tie and slides it off as smooth as a rope trick.

After we make love he stares at me in the candlelight like he always does when we're done. Touching me gently, turning me over.

"You're like a scientist," I said once, "Get out a magnifying glass, why don't you?"

"Not a scientist," he said, "a lover. I'm admiring you, not examining you. I'm reverent before you."

He strokes my hip and I start to cry again, turning my head so he won't see. But of course he senses it right away. He thinks he's so sensitive and he is. He says, "You're so beautiful and so full of feeling," like my heart creaking apart is a lovely thing to watch.

I want to tell him what he's full of but he's all I have. And in spite of myself he's stimulated the tiny bit of pride I have left. I'm full of feeling and that's a good thing, I think, it's why he likes me. That and my boobs.

"Can I get you anything?" he says, getting up and crossing the room to the whiskey, bending down over his little makeshift liquor cabinet.

"Yes," I say and sit up on the foam mattress, propping pillows against the wall, the sheet around my waist. I look at him, knowing my tears have made my black eyes even shinier. So I'm not surprised

when he turns with the glasses and says “Black Beauty.” He puts on his boxers, as white as his teeth, as his white shirts.

“Where you goin’, Red Rider?” I ask him.

“Nowhere.” But after he hands me my drink he doesn’t join me but sits on the edge of the mattress, looking off at the tiny room as if he’s sitting on the seashore.

My heart starts thumping like it’s a frog trying to leap up my chest and find its way out of my mouth. I take a big sip of the vodka. It helps. *I’ll have it if he wants. I’ll have it if he leaves Gloria. I’ll want to.* This is what I’m thinking as he lights two cigarettes and hands me one. Then he turns again and takes a deep drag, looking out again into the distance.

“This is so weird,” he says finally.

“Not really,” I say, taking another sip, “It’s the most natural thing in the world, when you think about it. The rich get richer and the poor get pregnant.”

He sits another couple of minutes like he didn’t hear me, long enough so he lights another cigarette from the coal of the first one, then he rests it in his ashtray on the floor and stands up. He takes his shirt, which is draped over the lampshade, and puts it on, buttoning the bottom buttons, rolling the sleeves up. Then he sits back down in the same position, back at the seashore, the sun a little brighter, a little breeze kicking up. He takes another drag.

He starts sighing and I really begin to worry. Sighing heavily through his nose and mouth. Every time I feel like the air’s coming out of me.

“What is going on?” I say finally. “What’s weird?”

He sighs again and puts the cigarette out, carefully separating the coal from the tip and tidily brushing it to the side of the ashtray. Then he turns his head. Here come the baby blues, I think.

“It’s really so weird,” he says.

“What’s weird, for god’s sake? What is so weird? Besides you, I mean.”

“Maybe it’s the Vitamin E I’ve been taking lately,” he says, smiling nervously. Then he looks away and says, “Gloria’s pregnant.”

My heart stops thumping. It quiets right down. No more tears, I think. I remember the ad. The toddler with its hair full of suds and smiling. Even though he’s braced for my anger, Paul pretty much flies off the bed I kick him so hard. He lands on his butt, facing me. He almost laughs but decides against it. He rubs his hip.

“That hurt,” he says.

“It is *weird*,” I say. “Since you and Gloria haven’t been together in how long? A year and a half? I think that’s what you said, you asshole. You goddamn pig. Is she seeing someone else? Or is it an immaculate conception?”

“Virgin birth,” he says.

“What?”

“Virgin birth,” he stands up rubbing his hip. He goes to the liquor cabinet. “People always get that mixed up. The Immaculate Conception is a term which refers — the tradition says — to Mary’s being born without sin. That is, born free of sin, while every other human is born with sin. The Virgin Birth is the term for Mary conceiving and delivering the baby Jesus without sexual intercourse. Not the Immaculate Conception. People get those mixed up all the time.” He’s peering through the Stolli bottle

like he sees something interesting. He pours some in my glass.

“What did you just say?”

He turns his eyes away from me and fill his glass. He sits back down on the floor.

“What did you just say to me?” I say.

IV.

He drives me to the clinic. Not quite. He drives me two blocks away to a sunny corner of treelined, bricklined Brookline.

“I’ll wait for you here,” he says. He can’t hardly look at me, the pansy. As a joke, I brought him a pair of Groucho glasses with the nose and mustache so he could come in with me, get through the busybody Christians yelling, wait in the waiting room. He wasn’t amused. “You know I would if I could,” he said, looking at the backs of his hands on the steering wheel of his new Miata, stretching his fingers.

“Yah,” I say. “I’m not in the mood to boost his ego today. ‘I’ll wear them,’” and I put them on. He doesn’t look for a couple of minutes. I just sit there under the bushy eyebrows. Finally he turns and laughs. I’m still taking care of him, the prick. I get out of the car, wearing the Grouchos.

“You’re gonna take them off,” he calls after me. “Aren’t you?”

After I turn the corner and the morning sunshine hits me, I take off the Grouchos and put on my fake RayBans. I look around the nice, law-abiding neighborhood before I toss the joke glasses. They land on a bare bush right-side up. That will make someone laugh. When I turn the next corner, I can see the clinic halfway up the block of clean, white sidewalk. Unclinical building, an old, beautiful Brookline house with a stone foundation, white columns on the porch, nice, newly painted wood. Three floors of family planning. I scope out across the street where the hecklers usually hang and it’s empty, or almost empty. Just one person holding up a picture. I look down at my boots and jeans, and try to disappear into my big sweater. Dionne Warwick’s ‘Walk on By’ pops into my head.

Across the street it’s just this one kid, like eleven years old in an unzipped raggedy looking blue parka, holding a big picture of a babylike fetus attached to a piece of wood. The picture’s nearly big as the kid. I’m surprised to see him there all alone in the bright sun behind the police tape. Maybe his mom’s gone off to get them a little something at Dunkin’ Donuts. His arms must be killing him — he’s let the sign tilt so it’s leaning on one of his shoulders.

Just as I’m passing the front of the building, a gust of wind blows up and the picture is pulled out of his hands and flies halfway across the street. He’s smart enough not to run after it, thank God.

I check out the traffic and walk out into the street, pick up the sign and go over to him. He’s a striking looking kid with green eyes and dark hair. Looks like he wants to run but doesn’t. I haul up the sign, fighting with the wind to get it straight like it’s a big umbrella. The boy reaches out his arms and I hand it to him. When he smiles and says “thanks,” I see he’s got a cleft palate.

“You remind me of the strongman at the circus,” I say and he looks a little confused like he’s never heard of the strongman at the circus. Probably hasn’t. It’s probably not a video game. I get a whiff from the Dunkin’ Donuts and all of a sudden I’m starving.

The Grouchos are already gone when I stroll back to the car forty-five minutes later, balancing a cruller on a large coffee. Paul starts to get out of the car then thinks better of it, hunkers back in and opens my door, leans out to help with the food.

“How are you, honey?” he says, managing to wait for my answer before taking a bite of the cruller.

“Tired,” I say, fastening my seat belt. “Very tired.”

“My poor baby,” he says and holds my face in one hand, the cruller in the other.

“Let’s just go,” I say.

He carefully puts the coffee in its holder and starts up his new baby, which purrs into action. I’ll show you Immaculate Conception, I think, as we get moving.

Alec Solomita has published fiction in the *Southword Journal*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Adirondack Review*, among other publications. He was shortlisted by the *Bridport Prize* and *Southword Journal*, and named a finalist by the *Noctua Review*. His poetry has appeared in *Algebra of Owls*, *The Galway Review*, *MockingHeart Review*, *Driftwood Press*, and elsewhere. His poetry chapbook, “*Do Not Forsake Me*,” was published by Finishing Line Press in 2017. He lives in Somerville, Mass.

Carla Durbach

The Properties of Water

The professor's mother is dying.

His brothers sacrifice goats to the ancestors in the backyard until the blood runs in spurts, staining their hands and the grass crimson. They barbecue the meat afterwards and invite the neighbors. But the cancer remains, digging in from the inside, taking root and spreading.

Soon, his mother is confined to night chills and feverish dreams of summer rain and thunderstorms, and crisp midnight air. Confined to longing for the pulsing beat of the blistering African sun. Later, the professor is summoned by a phone call and told to get on a plane.

He doesn't think the ancestors are listening. Why speak to the dead when it is the living that crave you? Perhaps, he thinks, that is the point.

The morning light filters through the curtains, threading and falling softly on his wife's face. She bats at her cheek, grumbles something and turns over in the throes of sleep. The bed groans beneath her pregnant bulk. Sometimes, after a long day, the baby kicks at the walls of flesh and then his wife stops mid-sentence, eyes widening in amazement as she draws her husband's hand to her round, moon belly. The professor's heart beats a little faster then.

In bed, he is conscious of every breath, of the warmth of his skin, of nerve endings on fire. His thoughts evade capture. Have him lying awake for hours. Waiting for the phone to ring with fatal news so that his stomach will drop and his hands will tremble as he changes the reservation, maybe too late.

But the phone call doesn't come. Plans remain. Tomorrow evening, come six o'clock, he will leave the only life he has known for the past twenty years. Seems like centuries since he has been back there. Now that he calls another place home.

In the kitchen he brews the tea, and thinks about his trip to Johannesburg, where his mother is dying. The twenty hours of travel, stuck in flying, roaring monsters that defy the laws of gravity, spread thinly between life and death on different continents. He thought he had left it all behind, buried under miles of stretched out sky, but somehow it has come back for an appointment.

He brings the cup to his lips, sips, scalds his tongue, slams the cup into the sink. Tea everywhere, flying shards of ceramic taking refuge in the corner where counter and wall meet, on the window sill, inside the small terracotta pots with the basil and the thyme. The cutting edge of nutrition, now sliced.

Mother, mother, I am on my way, he wants to say but the words don't come.

"You must go." His wife says. She is brave and independent, and speaks her mind and shuns her umbrella when storms threaten. She was born and bred in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, has a thick skin as a result. Either that or she would risk being flayed.

The professor's skin is thinner, worn down by ancient battles, where silence was as swords. Equally jagged and sharp. There was no space in between.

"You think you're white now?" One of his brothers asked when he broke the news at the age of eighteen. A scholarship abroad to study the classics and ancient history. Fraternizing with the enemy, a roll in the hay with the colonial oppressors. *How. Could. You.*

"All set up for the American dream, hey?" Said the other, clicking his tongue. "Mr. freaking poetry. Just remember where you've come from."

The professor wondered how he would ever forget.

His father sat by the window, reading the newspaper. A railway crash in Kagiso, more violent demonstrations downtown, a teen raped and abandoned in a field. A robust woman with a pixie hairstyle smiled at him from the back page, the winner of a vast sum of money in the Lotto draw.

“Oh, stop it, you two.” His mother came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, eyes glazed with pride and sorrow “If you had the chance you would take it, too.”

His father carried on reading the newspaper.

The professor packed his bags, a small suitcase and a backpack – he didn’t own much. He filled them with clothes, toiletries, books, fear, defeat, resentment – all the necessary tools in life – and left the next morning for the airport. Left a note for his mother, nothing else. In the beginning, he would phone to speak to her, to let her know he was still alive. Surviving. But he would call when he knew there was no one else at home.

He looks up to see his wife halfway down the stairs, rubbing her eyes, sluggish.

“Are you coming back to bed? It’s Saturday.”

Her voice is a balm. Like being lost for decades and finally being returned home. The relief lodges inside him, curling and settling there.

“I’ll be up in a minute, with offerings.”

She smiles and walks back upstairs, carefully and slowly, feeling for each solid step, one hand on the railing.

They met in college, she was studying law while he was hiding between the pages of Homer, Ovid and Hesiod, adrift and bloated with strange words. Navigating the library aisles. He wasn’t looking for anyone or anything, but she was persistent. She felt sorry for him even though she denies it– he thinks that she did. He has little to offer, apart from the hollow husk of his body, and he is surprised it ignited life. He wonders what kind of man his son will turn out to be. Wonders if his son will hold his own in the world of real men.

After breakfast he falls asleep on the bed, to the echo of water gushing in the shower. His wife no longer uses the bath tub, the strain shows on her face when she has to heave herself up from reclining. She sings softly while she lathers and he lets his muscles relax, sinking deep into the unknown as her silhouette fades. He dreams of rain, of waterfalls. His mother’s arms reaching for him across the water but she is a mist, dissolving between his fingers.

He wakes up with a start, breathless and sweat drenched. Clutching the bed sheet with his fisted hands.

This time, when he packs, the clothes are lighter but everything else remains the same.

#

When I was a girl, my sisters and I would run barefoot down the dust path, toppling clumsily down the grassed embankment to the water, just to look at our rippled reflections.

‘Ai Amahle, you tempt the water spirits.’ My older sister was timid and fearful, always expecting some demon to be skulking amongst the reeds. During thunderstorms Lena would pull the covers over her head while the rest of us drank hot, milky tea and told ghost stories.

‘Ssh, there is no such thing.’ We had learned about God in Sunday school and the nightmares had ceased. But my voice quivered none the less.

There were crocodiles in the water. Sometimes they would approach the very edge of the river,

submerged, looking like an undulated rock, gliding, and before long, the snap. My neighbor's son was taken that way, while helping some tourists canoe across the river, until the water churned and two of them were never seen again. A white man and a black boy, never came up for a single breath. Not even a hand, a foot, a finger. There was no apartheid in that river.

Then it was the next day and I was all grown up. The water still held its magic. But I found that there were more frightening things than crocodiles or water spirits.

#

Turbulence keeps him awake for hours; the *Poets of the English Language, from Tennyson to Yeats* adorns his lap. He doesn't know why he brought the book in the first place. His mind is muddled, his thoughts scattered, teeming with incoherence. He asks for water and a tall flight attendant with plaited hair and glossed fingernails brings him a plastic cup. He crushes it between his fingers, spilling it on himself and the woman beside him.

"I'm terribly sorry," He says, "you see, my mother is dying."

He mops at the water with a serviette, looks up to find the woman staring at him.

"Here." He hands her a new serviette, hopes she doesn't expect much conversation.

She tells him about her son, home from Afghanistan, mourning one of his legs, left behind on the combat field.

He imagines the leg, clad in army fatigues in the middle of a desert, left for the enemy to contemplate like a political statement. Like the crow in the Pauper's Turnip Field, foreboding those who are at the very edge of death.

Now, the woman thanks God every day for the loss of the leg. She would rather have a handicapped son than a full casket. She is on her way to meet her sister in London. They haven't seen each other for years. She wishes him well for his connecting flight.

The professor leans his head back and closes his eyes. His thoughts persist, the agitators. Inevitable, that coming home always entails loss of some kind.

#

My oldest sister has come back to see me. She only left a few days ago to take care of her family. Now she is back again. She says she is worried I will pass without her here, to hold my hand. But she knows that I am not afraid of death. She is really here to see my son.

He is coming. I can feel it in my bones. My youngest. He was always his aunt's favorite. Her okuncane, her little one. Thoughtful, cautious, quiet. Like her, he avoided vivacious laughter, impulsive adventures. Always observing from the sidelines. His nose in a book of some sort. Shying away from the fireworks. Being bullied by his brothers. His father did not know what to do with him.

Now my son teaches at a foreign university, all about the great writers and things. People wrap themselves up in fancy words and serve up the bundles in paperbacks or hardcovers so that people like me can land up scratching their heads in bewilderment.

'Ai, Lena,' I say, 'he came out of me, but he grew within you. Your heart gave life to my son and then, somehow, you transferred him to me, gifted me this child.' She laughs when I say that. She knows we are connected and he is the cord between us.

My sister holds my tired hand between her own, she closes her eyes so that I do not see but her cheeks are moist.

'Ai, watch it wena, I am not dead yet,' I say. 'Why do you go about crying like that?'

#

The last flight. He hangs behind, lets everyone else go before him. Out, out. He wants to shove them through the door of the plane, onto the jet bridge, then he will close the door and barricade himself inside until someone decides to fly him back. Of course, he does nothing of the sort.

The professor drapes his coat over his arm, stands luggage in hand, lingering at the back of the queue in dignified silence.

They give him trouble through security because of his American passport. He is supposed to have a South African one but he didn't bother renewing it. They let him go with condemnation and a warning.

One of his brothers is waiting for him, restless on his feet, grey patches in his hair. His eyes light up when he sees him. They greet one another, solemn, as if they saw each other only yesterday.

"Sad times, little brother," he says, "sad times."

The professor nods, keeping his head down. He forgot how he used to do this frequently, keep his head down. At home, at school, walking through the neighborhood as if it was a war zone. He didn't look around. There are some things that should remain unseen and then there are others that he likes to pretend about. If you don't look something in the eye, maybe it won't know you are there.

#

My son looks older, so much older. He has let his beard grow and his face has filled out, contouring around his smooth cheek bones giving him an air of poetic apprehension and uncertainty. He reaches for me the minute he walks in, the arms that clung to my legs so many years ago, wrap themselves around my frame as we embrace.

The last time I saw him was at his wedding and he was smiling so widely that I thought the room was filled with majestic stars. I was there as his mother, his witness, the only one from the family to be flown in and to attend. My husband had already left me, aligned himself with greener pastures and moved to the tip of the continent, the farthest edge. Maybe he jumped. I don't know. The other two boys were married with children born or on the way.

My son danced with his bride.

I drank it up and it was as champagne bubbles, flowing down my throat. My faith returned to me, both invigorating and a delight, all at once cleansing and refreshing.

Now, we talk and talk. I tell him about the old man next door who comes and sits outside my window when I can't sleep and plays me love songs. He plays Stimela and Hugh Masekela and some others I don't recall. He tells me they were Mandela's favorites.

'I didn't know you knew the president so intimately,' I told him through the open window.

'Woza Amahle, my beautiful one, we had a standing appointment, him and I,' he said and then he laughed and played more music and I listened and the pain was less.

'My son,' I say as I draw him closer to me, 'I need you to do something for me.'

'Anything,' he says.

'I need to go to the water, to the river where I grew up, I need to go there.'

But you can't, how can you go, so frail, so thin, so shrunk inside your skin— his eyes tell me.

'My son,' I say, 'appearances are deceiving. Do this for me and don't tell Lena. You Anti will drop one

of her kidneys instantly if she hears about this.'

He nods. I touch his face with my fingertips.

'Take me to the water, my son. And bring the old man along.'

#

He finds the old neighbor at the corner of the Street, by the traffic light, doing his habitual jig. Feet moving rhythmically back and forth, an old radio cassette player on his shoulder, running on batteries, music blaring. Now and then he lifts up his hand as if to signal with his finger. The shuttle taxis come to a screeching halt so close to him that they nearly touch him but the old man doesn't flinch. When they realize he is not intending to go anywhere, some of the drivers fling curse words his way, wave their hands in exasperation. Others laugh and ask how he is. Then they take off down the road, lifting dust and flicking stones, because the passengers are getting restless.

When he sees him, the old man smiles, displaying yellowed, splintered teeth. The cassette player is leaned against the light post.

"Ah, Sawubona Uthisha." Hello teacher, I see your dignity and respect.

The professor cringes at the greeting.

"Ngikhona." I am here. Before you saw me, I did not exist.

"And tell me, Uthisha," The old man inclines his head, "how is life treating you on the other side of the world?"

The professor tells him about the deserts and mountains, the snow-capped peaks, the arid plains, the way the sky turns from gray to pink to red over the months and finally to a burnt, glowing orange as the sun dissipates into the evening. The description helps him fade into the background.

"And tell me son, is it as beautiful and all this?" The old man extends his arm in sweeping motion.

They both smile and remain silent. Knowing that beauty is variant, temperamental and found in vistas, in tastes and smells and very, very dependent on who you happen to be with.

"Son," the old man says, "give my greetings to your dear mother."

The professor nods, buries his hands deep inside his pockets. He wants to thank the old man but his tongue is sticking to the roof of his mouth, collecting African dust. He wants to look the old man in the eye and tell him that his serenades have kept his mother company in the dark watches of night. The love notes slowly seeping through her skin, into her recesses and fractures, filling her up until she can lick them from the edge of her fingertips in the morning light.

He shakes his head, starts to walk back home, then remembers why he came in the first place, runs across the road towards the old man. Again.

At night, the professor misses his wife. It emerges as a deep ache whose edges claw from inside his chest and spread, expanding over the breadth of his frame until he can barely hold it in. A reckless urgency. He wants to feel the warmth of her body next to him, to hold her face in his hands, their son nested between them. When he speaks to her on the phone, he holds his breath. He asks his son, silently and secretly, to hold on. To wait for his return. And he thinks the boy understands, when he whispers it into the night, to the other end of the world. He imagines threads of words that hook into each other, bubbling up into the star speckled sky, at first a tower and then a bridge that arches and then stretches all the way across the Atlantic.

They are ready to leave at dawn. The professor's mother cocooned in a blanket on the front passenger

seat of the car. The old man in the back seat, bar cassette player.

It's a conspiracy. Sneaking away like this. Anti Lena would have never permitted this. Would have raised her hands in alarm, gasping and making all sorts of clucking disapproving sounds, her soft body wobbling with reprobation: *What if something happens? A sudden bout of coughing, a car accident, a crocodile. A crocodile? Yes, a crocodile, hidden in the water, lurking. I saw that man and that boy; both vanish with a splash. I was there when it happened.*

But she wasn't. She is still traumatized by hearing of the event and her mind has transformed it into a memory, made her a perpetual witness. Since then she always looks out for crocodiles in the water and on land. They are the enemy. Crouching around the corner, waiting. All those razor, sharp teeth and long mouths. Could swallow you whole or chomp you in half with one bite.

Escape is imminent until Anti appears in front of the car, in her raincoat and hat, clutching her handbag to her body as if it will take off running down the street if she lets it go.

"Where do you think you are going?" She demands. Marches indignantly to the side of the car and yanks the door open. The old man shuffles further in to let her have some space. The car sags beneath her weight.

"Don't even think about taking my sister anywhere without me." She props her handbag on her chest, scowling, "You should know better than that," she wags her finger at the professor who watches her vigilantly through the rear-view mirror.

She then turns towards her neighbor. "As for you, old man, don't think I don't know what you're up to, batting your eyes at my sister, with your music and such, doing the dance of love. You just watch yourself and keep your hands where I can see them."

The professor looks at his mother on the seat next to him. Tears squeezing out from the corners of her eyes, shimmering down her face. At first, he worries that the pain overwhelms, that the grief has finally come. But no.

He sees her now.

Eyes tightly shut, throwing back her head, as she howls with laughter.

#

I am nearly at the water's edge, so close to baptism that I can almost taste it. I read somewhere that the Jews had special baths for ceremonial purposes, used to purify their bodies for God before approaching the altar. I shoot out a prayer to the one who holds me in place.

I have always longed for water, not the blood of goats but when you're this old and this sick, nobody listens or maybe they are only desperate.

'My son,' I say, 'you must let go.'

He looks at me, frowning.

'Yes,' I say, 'whatever you're holding, whatever you've seen and carried all the way with you to America, it is now time to let it go.'

I motion towards the river.

My son is looking at me as if I have lost my mind.

'Listen my son,' I say as I grasp his arm, 'we have come here, not for me. I have made my peace long ago and many times I have dipped my whole body into that water and let it wash over me. But you are carrying a weight, pressing down on you from within and now is the time to set it free and let the water

take it, down into the ocean.

'Don't worry my son, do you not know?

'That the tendency to oppress is not determined by the tone of one's skin. Betrayal comes in so many colors as does loyalty and love and surrender. We think we're alone. Look around you, my son, there's still so much to be known.'

#

The professor stands up to his waist in flowing water, holding onto his mother, the current strong enough to draw them down. Anti Lena is standing, shrieking at the edge of the river. The old man attempts to calm her but he is knocked back by a wallop from her handbag.

"There are no crocodiles in there." He tries to tell her but Anti is beyond being reasoned with.

The professor looks at his mother. In her eyes are dancing stars, glimmers of hope, threads of fire and of light. He doesn't know how long they have before the sun goes down, before the waters begin to rise.

And that's all right.

Carla Durbach has published her psychology research in academic journals such as *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in South Africa* and the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. She is tentatively branching out into the world of fiction, a world which she enjoys inhabiting now and then. She lives in British Columbia, Canada, with her husband and three ninja cats who are plotting to take over the world.

Jim Stoner

Cain Slays Abel



The Seduction: Adam and Eve



Colorful Jesus



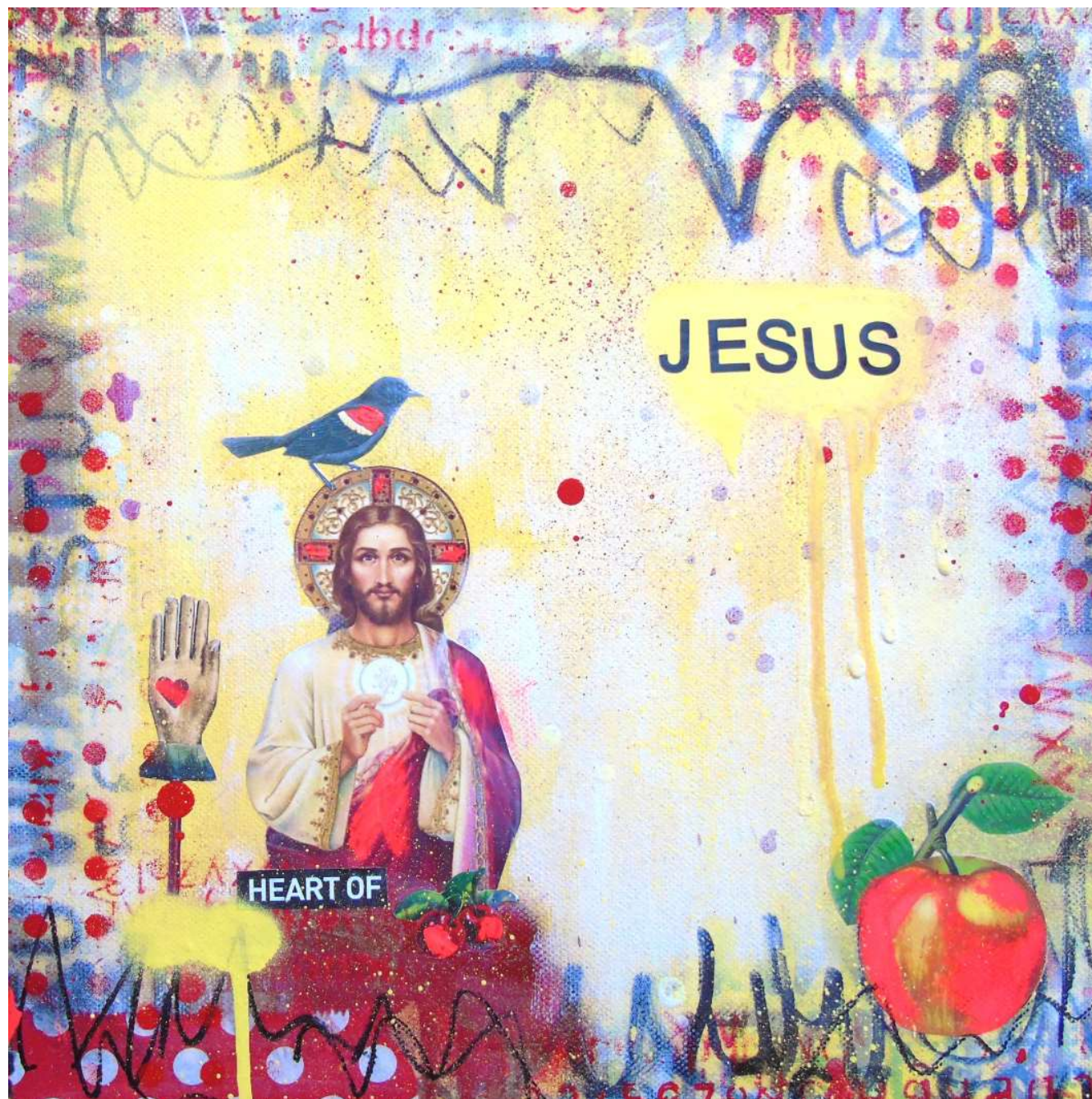
Jim Stoner is a successful visual artist and creative writer. He was a featured poet in *The Pacific Review* and has published other poems in *Cultural Logic*, *The Awakenings Review*, *Education Studies*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *The Wisconsin Review*, *Parenthesis Journal*, *Fjords Review*, and in the poetry anthology *Silent Voices*. His artwork and poems are forthcoming in *Jesus, the Imagination: A Journal of Spiritual Revolution*. He is author of the forthcoming book of artwork and poems, *Iterations of the Boy*. Stoner teaches English and humanities at a small college. He home lives in rural East Tennessee where he also has his art studio. His website is jimstonerartistry.com. Like his page on Facebook [Jim Stoner Artistry](#). You can buy his work on Etsy: [Original Artwork, Prints, and Greeting Cards by JimStonerArtistry](#)

Lorette C. Luzajic

I Miss Feeling Close to God



Heart of Jesus



Lorette C. Luzajic is a Toronto, Canada based visual artist, poet, and founding editor of *The Ekphrastic Review*, a journal devoted entirely to writing inspired by art. She has four poetry collections, and has been widely published in print and online journals, including *Cultural Weekly*, *KYSO Flash*, *Rattle*, *ArtAscent*, *Everyday Poetry*, *Geez Magazine*, *United Church's Wonder Cafe*, *Peacock Journal*, and more. Her artwork has been exhibited locally, across the USA, throughout Mexico, and in North Africa. Visit her at www.mixedupmedia.ca.

Tamayo Muto

Help



Tamayo Muto is an emerging artist from Japan. She does painting, drawing, and photography. Although she just started creating artwork very recently, she has been working everyday and making new works. Her painting style is characterized by its unique bright color, called “happy color”. Most of her works speak for feelings of young women and ethnic minorities, as she herself is living as such entities in the US. She is very interested in Mexican culture, especially its vibrant colorful art works and festivals, and that might effect her style of art. She is showing works in many art events in San Diego.

Philip Abbott

Hell As We Dance



Philip Abbott is a Northwest artist working in multiple mediums in 2D and 3D. Colorful..skewed..interesting not following any real style. Random, with passion and purpose.
<https://eyesofphil.tumblr.com>

Ann Privateer

Soft Landing



Line Study



Palm Seed



Ann Privateer began taking photographs when she received a Brownie for Christmas. Her photographs have appeared in *Third Wednesday* and have placed in photography contests.

Lorette C. Luzajic

Boat on the Sea of Galilee



Capernaum Synagogue



Basilica of Annunciation in Nazareth



Lorette C. Luzajic is a Toronto, Canada based visual artist, poet, and founding editor of *The Ekphrastic Review*, a journal devoted entirely to writing inspired by art. She has four poetry collections, and has been widely published in print and online journals, including *Cultural Weekly*, *KYSO Flash*, *Rattle*, *ArtAscent*, *Everyday Poetry*, *Geez Magazine*, *United Church's Wonder Cafe*, *Peacock Journal*, and more. Her artwork has been exhibited locally, across the USA, throughout Mexico, and in North Africa. Visit her at www.mixedupmedia.ca.

Please consider submitting your work for our Winter Issue!

We start accepting submissions for poetry, prose, art, and photography on September 1st.

Find our submission guidelines at: <http://heartoffleshlit.com/submission-guidelines/>

HeartOfFleshLit.com

END