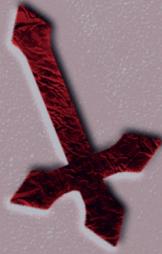


MIDNIGHT
MASS



▶ ANTHOLOGY

edited by Rachael Crosbie and Charlie D'Aniello

the
MIDNIGHT MASS
Anthology

edited by
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Editor's Notes

It's not the first thing on screen, but it is certainly the cornerstone of the show—The elder and confused Monsignor Pruitt pleaded for his life, lying on a dark and dusty ground. Standing above him was a creature so foul and terrifying, the image searing as its fleshy wings arched behind its back. When it outstretched its hand in the darkness, it pierced its wrist until blood fell in the Monsignor's mouth. This new gift of life, of youth, of restoration, convinced him that this creature must be an angel. An angel who would bestow a phenomenal mission upon the Monsignor: return to his sleepy, island town and spike their Sunday offerings—wine/the blood of Christ—with the creature/angel's blood. Then, everyone else will miraculously return to health, return to their absolute best, return to living. *Midnight Mass*, directed/written by Mike Flanagan, is a mini-series about vampires and yet not quite about vampires.

I share this cornerstone because it's the crux of which the meat of the show grinds against (and for). The crux full of hope and blind faith.

Only one week after the show aired, *Midnight Mass* has affected and horrified so many of us that we felt compelled to put together a special anthology. We hope you find something in these pieces, and, of course, watch the show again and again.

Rachael Crosbie

This is it, then. The Belle has stopped its journey at the docks of this hallowed island. Your palms sweat, empty, and search for something un/holy to keep you safe. There is nothing. You have arrived here, at the pages of an anthology you might not be ready for, but still cannot quite resist.

The Midnight Mass Anthology was inspired by possibly the most memorable of Mike Flanagan's projects to date, and I must say that the work you will find here has a similar impact. It was put together, by us editors and authors alike, with a passion and flame that we hope will engulf you from the first page to the last.

Welcome. Make yourself at home in this land of God and fire.

charlie D'Aniello

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any/all Content Warnings/Trigger Warnings can be found on page 104; additionally, text versions of artwork can be found on page 107

POETRY

Father Paul, I...

Nicole Tallman

grew up without a church, borrowed a pew at a friend's in the summer. Drank the cloying fruit punch they served out of too-small paper cups. Ate their off-brand cookies. It was often dark and cool—the only light coming through the stained-glass windows. Light fractured like a prism. I stood at the feet of the crucified Jesus. Felt the puncture of nails and thorns. Put the dollar my mother gave me in the gold offering bowl. Everyone always seemed sad and solemn. I don't remember joy, but restraint. The smell of wax and bleach. The organ droning on. The few people who weren't tone deaf leading the chorus. My mind always wandering somewhere, anywhere, but there. To running outside in the grass. To playing Monkey in the Middle. To coloring. To Lazarus. To Gabriel. To Mary. To sin and suffering. To blood. To the priest in his simple robes. To the little green Bible he gave me. To his unwavering belief that he could actually save me. To the girls I wanted to hug a little too long.

girls aren't meant to be clipped

a golden shovel for erin greene

Sofía Aguilar

girls aren't allowed to hate everyone.
we were never taught how, even when the world gets

us so wrong. contorting us into their
clothes, not hung too tight or too low, silent wings

coughing feathers from our backs, clipped
far before flight and somber song at

the throat. but only some-
times. only when there's no other point.

only when our skin goes quiet, sugar-brown as cardamom
seeds and you don't know us like you did.

you'll wonder, soon, when you
stopped recognizing our face, stopped get-

ting the stories, misshapen tales we retell at your
kitchen table, heads emerging from under our wings.

girls aren't meant to be clipped

no longer the girls you took scissors to and clipped
until our eyes said 'yep'

rather than our thoughts, what we meant by 'oh'
and then nothing, what we wished for in the 'yes'-

es we said and how deep we feared the day
when you longed us into you-

r shape and we re-
fused ourselves into flying, feathered things. again birthed, born.

From "Book IV: Lamentations" of *Midnight Mass*

drift

after leeza and warren

Sofía Aguilar

the island is burning, this land
we built for and from ourselves,
heat, small town faith and time told in sand—

hear that?

even from here, from this boat,
bodies crackling like timber, bones drowning in flame,
burning cold while us two shiver close and float

and there, the wind howling, or maybe their moans,
all the dead we left behind without burial
below earth, only sunrise, shoreline, home

our oars have never seen such storm
before.

the dead, for now, i'll try to keep at bay
the birds, feline cubs and blood—
what would the mainland say?

when will it stop? where will we flee?
how long will we remain servants of this breeze?

will you ever offer your hand
again, voice god's thoughts in your fingers,
your palms a prayerbook even if we're damned?

....

drift

sometimes, i believe,
loving another is just like this:

drifting in a boat in the middle of the sea,
lonely and endless

the way drifting can be.

10.16.21 [POEM ONE]

B.A. O'Connell

I finished *Midnight Mass*—
and saw the fear of Bev in my mirror—
I have taken the flame of Revelation,
and searched for retribution,
and thought myself chosen and worthy—

and I have been Mildred,
in love with a man of God—
And have done terrible things
in the name of that love;
have seen that man go through
awful trials and tribulations
for our mutual destruction;

And I've been Riley in desperate
need of purpose—but unlike him,
I have not been brave enough
to burn away for a truth
spectacularly open in my ashes,
never burned away to tell this knowledge
to a friend, to anyone, to all the aching world,

10.16.21 [POEM ONE]

but let's pretend, you and I,
that I am, in this moment, a person
obsessed—prepossessed with
a need to reveal whatever I have
to give to you,

so we are in the canoe,
and I am no longer me—I am a
symbol, a thing about to be lit,
and burned into a mind
your mind,

and I am transformed,
the sunrise is coming soon--
so, I will tell you—I will tell you
what we all come to know in
the end—

watch the grey early morning water,
I am bearing it all for you,
my time is limited,
so flash back to a moment on the
couch—what happens when we die?

What happens?

Speaking for myself--
fear—I am afraid—I am knowing

10.16.21 [POEM ONE]

when this sun rises,
when the light hits me—
I'll be ashes—a thing burned,

so please,
find me in the music—the stars—
the atoms—your dreams,

you who live for only a
beat or two longer
than I

and understand, in the end, there is

no greater love,
than the erasure of self.

10.26.2021 [POEM ONE]

B.A. O'Connell

"Be not afraid—I go before you always"

-Deuteronomy 31:8

If I were to face my death like the glorious rising sun of God's eternal beauty—
then I would know that there is no rest in death—there is no deliberate choice
in saying what I was and what I wanted to be;

for God knows my failures, my faults,
the very color of the unoxygenated blood—and if the music of My Sweet Lord
is the new first breath I must take at the breaking dawn—

what I mean is, the sun rises for everyone—even the blind—even the living—
but most especially for sighted and dead;

and it will burn us away—it will turn us to the dust we have always
dreamed we are not; ashes in the words of God—ashes amongst the flaming churches
and drowning shores, while the boat that would take us away,
take us down the River Styx or across the ocean of the dead,

has been laid to waste by fire—we wait, we always wait for Him to come again.
And in all the movement and the turning of the Earth, in gathering of stars to galaxies,
is every curve of every fingerprint—is every long-winding route to the Final
Judgement—
and I have called it forth;

Yes, in the first drop of blood—the first taking of New Covenant—and the
acknowledgement
that God, that He too, has died—I opened myself up to the knowing that my life
was never going to be my alone or going to last forever.

10.26.2021 [POEM TWO]

B.A. O'Connell

{Fr. Paul Reevaluates}

Thirst is an incredible thing in the desert—is a thing that makes your lips
stick and peel—turns your soft palette into a razor against an aching throat—but that
wasn't the only thirst—the only thing
that made me take a blood oath, a new beginning in the blood of a new god;

which is to say, that maybe I always, if not knew, suspected that the thing before me
was not an Angel in the biblical sense but in the sense of a man
lost, lonely, and afraid—if I were to die, would it have been a greater mercy?

I suppose we ask the same questions of God, of our Heavenly Father, and if
in the taking of that blood, I was not to repay the kindness of a
savior or damnation—whatever
it was, I was sure it was from love—from the offering of second chances,
the need to find my way back to the beginning,
back to the time before the cloudiness of mortality and demented half-thoughts
had taken such a strong hold—

which is to say, I suppose, that I was healed from love and I wanted to heal with love
the woman and the town to which I owed so much—I just wanted my daughter to
know,
and I guess the answer is—no, no this was not the second chance I was owed,

but the damnation with which I had always had a foot halfway down the path in my
desperation for understanding—for knowing—for wanting miracles in the dirt that I
did not fertilize to soil—which is to say, I've damned us all for my unfruitful workings.

Phantom Pregnancy

Dana Knott

An island shelters, it isolates.
It surrounds itself with ocean
and distance. A womb is its own
island, a bubble encapsulating
a tiny fetus floating in amniotic fluid.
A church is a sanctuary as God is
a rock, a wafer, a sip of red wine.
When you eat or drink or pray
you invite the Holy Ghost in to stay.
There is room for no one else,
only Him. The blood of the covenant
is thicker than the waters of the womb.

Riley's Return

Dana Knott

I do not need the vertical and horizontal lines
of the ashy cross on my forehead to remind me
that I am the child of the cosmos, that I am
stardust birthed from the death of a red giant.

I am ancient and elemental, the iron in my blood
forged in a nebula billions of years ago and light
years away. I cannot count a multitude of stars
in the night sky like I can add up my wasted days,

the time I wasted away from you, lost in day-
dreams. How perfect you are here with me now
to wait for the solitary god of our solar system
and the stellar explosion of my body in the yellow

rays of dawn as the universe reclaims my light.

fated endings

Charlie D'Aniello

what was it they said
about *god* and his mercy—
what was it about redemption/resurrection, about life
ended/lost/eternal, fated endings lit
by the glow of pearly gates—

i must be sorry for
the way i've lived as though i never meant to fall
repentant on my knees

i cannot lie— i lived, solely
for the leaping at the birth of every fall

sunrise

Charlie D'Aniello

i.

scraping your knees on your buried bones,
you dug your grave anew
blood, blood, blood,
and cursed earth under purpled fingernails
your dew-stained gown clinging crimson wet

another sun/son risen,
another night lost
carving faulty faces on ash-black stones

ii.

in the end, you crave
the sting of mercy's notes, the acid burn
of water wine and blood

the cure to mortality

john compton

deaths came alarmingly
& smothered our emotions
under a burden
so fierce, we broke.

how do we return each one
like a bone to a body
to transgress their endings
to a burial we'll never reexamine?

transcend: drink
the communal wine:
die to live.

The Book of Revelation: The Covenant of the Angel

Ariel K. Moniz

1:1 Faith buried in the garden will bear fruit, with flesh of innocence and disbelief.

A child's cry will harken the final dawn and You will meet it there.

1:2 The Wanderer will kneel, stone-heavy, and throw Himself into unknowing.

His Blindness, Our Bread, His Death, Our Eucharist.

1:3 Sacrifice, dressed in shadow, will awaken after three days in the dark.

Devotion, dressed in gold, will rise and carry across the sea.

2:1 Suffering imbibed; They will ask how to swallow, how to become whole around it.

You will let the night answer Their call.

2:2 They will speak unto You: return to ashes, and forgive Us as You do Yourself.

You will do so with grace.

2:3 Promises white as bone, a chalice of lies, a sumptuous robe embroidered by Lazarus.

All who seek these will know Resurrection.

3:1 They will drink and They will become Themselves.

They will blame you and forget Their own sins.

3:2 No one can undo a Believer swifter than those who believed—

They too will be Gods on this night.

3:3 The Apostles will have done their weeping.

They will walk to the end of the earth and drown in Their fire.

4:1 Others will take a boat, will swallow the sand and salt of Repentance.

They will not forget the taste of miracles.

4:2 The night will be eternal, fire will cleanse the world, and Genesis will fly.

A hundred eyes below will wheel on the axis of Time.

4:3 Dawn will arrive—

Cleave the reddening sky, on the wings of a hymn.

survivors' prayer of divine forgiveness

for Leeza Scarborough and the rest of us who survived

Alessandra Nysether-Santos

we haunt you,
we know.
our living
like sand in your soul
even after
you took to the holy waters,
here we are
sticking in the softest
parts of you,
hard kernels scraping
open eternal abrasions
weeping with your guilt.
we know—
it's just like we pictured it.
our grief has hardened
around us
and within you,
like unforgiving claps of thunder
we bring you to the ground:
screaming animal
and we don't feel it,
that human tenderness
you took from us.
and so you are scared,
and you should be.

survivors' prayer of divine forgiveness

we hate you
and the things we could do to you,
we want you to hurt
to suffer
to make the animal noises
we made, begging
so we can tell you
no
and be heard, really listened to
when we give you
nothing but complete
absolute misery.
you are sorry,
damn right
you are sorry.
you stole from us,
who we were,
who we could have been,
that which we did not even have yet.
you reached through time
to destroy us,
and we are still here
not for you
or because of you,
but for forgiveness
for ourselves.
true, we are angry
still, but it's different here:
we forgive ourselves,
we conflated you with hate
and left you in our way,

survivors' prayer of divine forgiveness

until we exorcised ourselves
called back our power
and became gods
capable of both wrath and love,
and we forgive you
not for what you have done
but for ourselves
to move you from our path
to disentangle our souls
from you.

of martyrs and monsters

Alessandra Nysether-Santos

The bird in your hand is purring—
 humming the melodies
 of dreams far beyond
 the horizon. Everyone
carries this tiny bird—until it gets
to be too much to have
 something so fragile
 so perfect in their
care! So they bound the wings
to make the bird stiller
 stronger
 quieter— clipped
the cooing thing free
 from your heart, at
last liberating you
 from the pressure of some
Unattainable Greatness:
 what is the point?

Everyone gets their wings clipped at some point,
and you, Erin Greene, you didn't let her
clip this bird's wings. You let it go.

of martyrs and monsters

Some delight in the cruel
and calculated cutting
of wings, thinking He
loves gatekeepers—that He makes
monsters into martyrs, the
holier-than-thou happy
with halos of pure sun
upon their buzzing crowns. Rise!
Apostles of a monster
molded into a god on
the pulpit—massive wings
darkening the
crucifix behind it: revealing evil
halos glowing with
scorched earth irony, and
Erin Greene quietly holding the
monster, tenderly cutting wings
while sacrificing her body
and blood through a
wound in her side,
so the sun could rise
again on some small good.

He makes the sun rise on the evil and the good,
and the sun crowned Erin Greene a martyr.

men beholding monsters

Alessandra Nysether-Santos

No wonder men act how they do—
men behold monsters
and see angels,
so they believe, in turn,
that they are at least
a little divine:
there's no faster friend
than a man who's found God
where before he had Fear.
Just as soon then
does their will
become God's,
and as his will becomes God's,
all others become his,
and who becomes the monster?

Monsters seek men to make them angels,
to warp evil into rhyme
and brutal rhythm distorting
proverb into a sword
to sever the very strings
that bind you to goodness,
to your God.

the exorcism of nat raum

nat raum

i long for the day my head spins three hundred
and sixty degrees around almost like
the way brian sella said *break your neck and i will*
love you instead i'll just forget about you

[i've had dreams we lived in this house unfurnished. the lights are never on and it's almost always raining outside. steam engines blow whistles in the distance but the tracks out back sink deeper into a shroud of earth and fiddlehead ferns.]

[like memory fades, do things pixelate over time?]

the roots ran deep come april like crocuses
poking through broken soil nourished by acid rain
rotting out and falling down *it's funny*
the ways we talked each other into this

elsewhere the jones falls babbles *i follow*
rivers but i also torch bridges please don't sit
near me i go numb when i'm alone and i
never want company but i always want company *in the dark*
we exist in the void glassy smooth tide pools teeming
waiting to drown again *come daylight*
it's a bit more complicated

desperado sanitarium

nat raum

new moon will eat you, your satin,
your grandfather clock tolling orchestras
to suit the present tingle. pitch black stretches
further than eyes fathom around the floodlight
oases watching over sheetrock and cedar

tinderboxes, blotted-out bones of temples on a
pathway of no resolve. rosewater's languid
droughts wrapped tendrils and dug trenches
in sodden soil, dredging black gold one verdant
valley at a time. hold tight to your quivering

joys, to the smoldering stares into inky brume
which send shrouded beasts of prey scattering
into specter dust. new moon will eat you and
spit you out here in solitude, high glutton,
chasm of stomach swallowing itself. crunch.

A HYMN FOR AFTER HOURS IN THE CHURCH PARKING LOT

Rachael Crosbie

||: headlights glazed with creamsicle glow :|| | spit on my sweetstained
skin as he thumbs | pop rocks on my throbbing tongue & from | the
throat phlegm blows like a bubble wand | as i suck him clean
delicately for a delicacy | he wants me to look up open-mouthed | &
begging for his kisses fluid with pennies iron blood | until it's
communion and he consumes | my body | & fingers the sign of the
cross with lube from a pocket-sized white bottle | ||: & my flesh beats
on & on while midnight :|| ||: glosses from floodlights loud in unison
:|| | a summoning that wounds to bone | woozysick i pry the skin from
my lips | ||: for the body belongs to me for the body :|| ||: belongs to
dizzying dark & the way :|| ||: it can save me :||

||: headlights glazed with creamsicle glow :|| ||: & my flesh beats on &
on while midnight :|| ||: glosses from floodlights loud in unison :|| ||:
for the body belongs to me for the body :|| ||: belongs to dizzying dark
& the way :|| ||: it can save me :||

HAUNTOLOGY AS THE DISGUISE OF VAMPIRISM OR RELIGION

Rachael Crosbie

sweet smoke scatters in striae & sheer

hymns splintering sound—

where blue light jellyfishes out

& pulses through you;

your skin slipping off bones

from the shifting chandelier,

you're leaning on the window

of the church's stained glass,

you drink & let things become,

as gross angels press you out of body.

Decretum

Vera Hadzic

I. On the Wonders of Nature

You may find dead rats
in the churchyard. Worry
not: they seem things of fantasy,
but they are only swollen
with blue winter spores,
masses of gemstone green
or creek stones. Worms
are part of life's cycle.
White angels of regeneration—
imagine fossils you can swallow.
They will ask you about
the rats. Say anything. Say
God is everywhere. Say you feel
closest to Him when you see
the richness of blood, soak-red
and searching as fleshy
tongue. Worms will eat
anything.

II. On the Local Follies

Do not try to teach them
the rhythms of water. Save
it, for they won't listen
to how the clouds slit
into rain, how the rivers engorge
into great soapy pythons,
how when it is dry, you must
wait for water to return, how
you must feel the earth cough
under your heel, your toes
rub into powder. In a dry season,
the village girls will remove
their clothing and walk solemnly
to the river. They sleeve
themselves in pale water.
Their thighs are mosaicked
with green veins, unsaintly
herbs. Call it anything but
superstition.

Decretum

III. On Pilgrimage

My knees have felt Rome's
cold, high churches. White
pillars and volcanic floors, a city
where every beat of your heart
is caught only by marble ghosts,
deep eyes and real flesh-as-stone.
Pearl wetness to my fingers. Am I
here, then, and now? Cathedraled
in narrow shin-bone walls,
roofs surrendering their selves
into the sky's sunken wilderness.
As I write, I still dream
of the statues in Rome.
In that city it is possible to find
emptiness.

IV. On Speculative Confessions

The earth is somehow deeper
or harder than I remember,
thickened with leathery soil
and ropy spinal cords, other
hidden, unnameable things.
Tell your churchgoers it's easier
to dig down and in—not up
or out—to find gables
of cave-mineral, tapestries
woven in crystal roots, feel
the weight of it all collapse
and bury yourself beneath it.
I cannot ladder myself into heavens,
but perhaps we can mine beneath
their walls, emerge on the right
side.

V. On Love of Solitude

Why don't you gather
memories in the palm
of your hand? You could stay
here forever, harvest mould
turrets behind your ears.
Cold windows, sky tapestried with
stars. You could let them settle on your
skin.

Simbang Gabi para sa mga Puti

Keana Aguila Labra

Ano daw?

Help me to understand
what we get to keep
when these cats mew for
those who will not return.

Midnight mass?

Please, god.
I was born from a question,
Descended from defiance,
my knuckles bear the same bruises,
my lolo and I tilt the same crown.

Bakit meron silang

Simbang Gabi sa Easter? Ano ba yan?
Kasi their fears can only be found
in the imaginary, whereas our fears
are realized in white. In sacrament. In
grass. In dirt. In return. Where only here can
my mare's uncles be my lolo's neighbors.

Mercy. Tissues in bloom. Currency in
pasensya, ingat, and holding hands.

Ang Tatay ng Nanay ko, hinawak niya
ang kamay ko. Ang sabi niya,
you still have one. Sinabi ko,
I will always have two.

Please have mercy on us.

Only an (Aguila) Labra Would Fight God, Which is to Say Only I Would Fight God

Keana Aguila Labra

Because / where were you / when Lolo fell / and I wanted to scream against /
his weight because I could not carry him / but I needed to / because no one /
else was there / and I did it / because I needed to. / why were my sister and I
there / cleaning out home after childhood home / a test of tolerance and
faith / so now our skeletons sparkle in the sun / so much of my existence / is
because / someone needed me to / and I can't see myself living outside of /
what others need me to / because what about when / I need you too? / god / I
needed you / when I crossed / the street / eyes down to Mr. Max's 3rd grade
class / at Dorsa / and he laughed and said / honey, you could've been / hit by
a car / begging is like constantly being / hit by a car / each impact morphs /
please god / into fuck you god / fuck / you / god / where were you / why did
you / take my lolo / why / god / please / God / our sorrow is / too much.

after communion, i question god

Katherine J. Zumpano

the blood of christ – wine, warm and rust-colored,
coats my tongue and fills my throat with promises
of salvation. *amen* – i reply, find my place in the pews and kneel
while parishioners sing. i do not join. the hymns have no meaning
to me. empty words to a god i've long lost faith in.

a large bird flew past my window last night.

can i ascend, too? catholic guilt weighs heavy
on my soul, sins laid bare. i wonder

who could consume their savior. these purgatorial thoughts
consume me.

my lips are stained with cheap communion wine

as the choir cries out to their god, baring their teeth

in prayer. i don't belong with the devout. i belong with the devil.

*take this, all of you, and drink from it. this is my blood;
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.*

Until Sunrise

Kiri DeLandé

Overwhelmed by the infinite nothing, my hunger haunts the cosmos, stomach howling for a meal I know it can't provide. The void yawns into the midnight black, taunts me with its apathy; I turn my throat to the star-tipped claws of the heavens and I'm met with deafening disinterest, divinity's absence impossible to ignore. I'm searching for

a sign a serpent a sacrament

burned into my tender flesh, teeth tearing my skin as it delivers unto me the gift I guess I've always wanted; a poisoned proof, so palpable it pulses power in my blood, of something more. I didn't ask for

a curse a cruelty a craving

for the welcoming warmth I know your brilliant blood would provide. My search, buoyed by iron bars, was wrought from a need for nourishment— as a cub cries for milk, famine festered inside me. I picked the Quran clean of its bones, tasted the Torah with too-tough teeth,

did my time with cassocks and choirs, searching for the light. I spent my life as a wet match, fruitlessly fumbling for a spark, cavorting with kerosene, desperate for

Until Sunrise

a signal

a sigil

a suicide

in the absence of moonlight, gamma rays gallop across my skin, a self-immolation serenade to you, who always knew. This is not a test in your faith in Him, but in me, the black sheep, an Ishmael eaten by an existential

exhaustion I knew I could not outrun. But if you stay with me 'til sunrise, watching flames flicker from my fingertips, feasting on my famished flesh, I know you'll have the strength to go on. Scream, if you have to. No one can say I didn't try my best.

cat food

lukas ray hall

& the bodies surfaced. faces half bay-
mud breeze / half aged churn.

all that heaven risen up
from the sand. storm ashore,

red sky asking why

why

why

why.

& then the kittens emerge
from the fern groves, licking

the hunger off their whiskers.
corpse after corpse; sinewy food bowls.

if you want a miracle, look
at how cats can survive

on only what we could never give.



Communion

Halle Preneta

You give away your soul
like I give away my heart.
I crush your bones
as I consume the bread
that's supposed to be your body.
Doesn't it hurt?
Constantly giving yourself away
to people who don't even know you?
I drink the wine
that's supposed to be your blood.
How do you do it?
How do you give
and give
and give
away
and not feel the *pain*?
The intestines twisting like vines off trees,
heart clattering inside your throat
leaving you unable to breathe,
bones crushing,
grinding into finely tuned powder
feeling?
The suffering of knowing
there will never be something about you
that is truly yours
because you gave everything away
before you could define it for yourself?

Communion

How does it feel
to sacrifice your soul
person after person after person
crushing your bones,
depriving you of blood
until nothing is left
except an empty plate
and your shattered soul?
I watch as you bleed out in front of me.
I want to help you.
Tell you you are worth so much more
than sacrificing yourself
for the sake of other people.
Tell you you don't need to have a heart shaped hole
where your heart should be.
Tell you you are allowed to breathe
the same air I do.
But I recognize that maybe,
this is what you wanted for yourself.
That maybe,
sacrificing yourself is your way
of showing others that you care.
That maybe,
you're just a character in a fiction story
that others believe is real life.
So I crush your bones
in the bread I eat.
Suck you dry of blood,
leave you lightheaded,
in the wine I drink
and turn around to go back to my seat.

Communion

As I do, I look up at your statue
looming over me and whisper
“why do you do it?”
The look in your eyes says
“you give away your heart
like I give away my soul,
in tiny increments
to everyone you meet.
I recognize that maybe,
sacrificing yourself is your way
of showing others that you care
but you’re allowed to breathe
the same air I do.
Breathe before you disintegrate.
Put your heart back inside the heart shaped hole
in your chest
and tell yourself,
you are worth so much more
than sacrificing yourself
for the sake of other people.
Go out there and define who you truly are!”

Portrait of Love on Fire

Halle Preneta

Her long brown hair blows in the wind.
The fire snaking up her long legs
as she sits there, her hands tied to her sides
and to the wooden pole digging into her spine.
You can hear her screams ringing through the air
like church bells,
the fire continuing to snake past her legs
up to her hands and arms;
Perfectly manicured nails browning at the edges
as the fire consumes everything.
Her,
the wooden pole,
the full moon above you.
You watch her burn.
Her screams ringing,
the smell of rotten flesh
burning your nostrils,
The fear in her brown eyes
lit up by the flames.
You don't care.
You watch as her hair catches flame,
brown and red and orange mixing together
as if she were a painting of a fall landscape,
red leaves falling off brown trees,
mixing in with the grey sky.
You think it's beautiful.

Portrait of Love on Fire

The flames licking at her neck,
the heat suffocating her breath,
her screams getting louder and louder
until they die down
to silence,
leaving an empty space
where she used to be.

You don't care.

You turn around and walk away,
the moonlight illuminating your face as you
act as if this was just an everyday occurrence,
never to think of her again.

Empty Vessels

Lauren Theresa

Thou hast forsaken me.

You hang your idols in jewel filled rooms,
venerate the limbs that feed your vacant cause.
You search for something that doesn't exist,
waiting for the myth of a man who didn't hold his death.

Your Father
Your Son
Your Holy Spirit
And then there's me...

I am Holy Thursday.
Darkness before the Easter candle is lit,
stillness before incensed fog fills these halls.

I am the Agony in the Garden.
The steady pulse of chthonic veneration,
the cycle of life and death and life and death.

I am the blood that fills your open vessels.
The subterranean drumming,
the empty space where particles collide and brilliance explodes.

Empty Vessels

I am Mugwort rhizomes, seeds of Sacred Datura.
The whispers of stories untold,
the gold that outlines your stained glass scars.

You reject me and try to fill my void.
Filling yourselves with false prophets and for-profit neglect,
as corruption spreads in dusty corners you refuse to tend.

I am your hope.

You bury your holy in a box to keep them from dirt and ash.
You keep them from completing the cycle,
you keep them from me.
My cauldron. My vessel. My void.
My Dark.

But I am below and I am above.
The earth shaking and cathedrals set ablaze.
Unrelenting winds and waters that have the power to reclaim.

And my darlings,
I am rising.

Of Sorrowful Mysteries

Taylor Brunson

This cup does not pass us by,
does it? The final night, its golden
exhalations and amends unmade,

was always going to culminate
in blue periphery, receding and returning
from every direction. I understand now

how it ends. Even biblically,
we are taught how what is human
triumphs over strength. An agony,

pleading: *what kind of longing
could ever outweigh that I want you
safe?* I'm not as strong as you.

I never was, and now I must be
reconciled with how I could hurt you.
In what light leaves the eyes

lambent, everything feels
like my last act. I once meant
to grow into the space between

of Sorrowful Mysteries

love and faith. Rather, I wanted time
to be good enough to penance
my way into something better,

out of a guilt as reliable as dawn
sea-halved and bled over every tide.
I did my best. What is love if not this

complete honesty: I am afraid
I am at my best when I admit
I cannot forgive myself. What is love

if not bearing witness when you could
just as easily run. In the same sun
rising on us all, I forget again

what belief I speak to. If not God,
then only you. I did my best.

Hold Me Holy

The Rt. Hon. Nathan Dennis

On an evening that settled like dreaming,
I shuffled o'er the stones of The Old World,
Ambling to the arcane shrine that I heard
Could absolve my soul with light redeeming.

Sweet redemption! I was in such sore need
From the guilt – shame – of my unholy deed.
So desperate would I voyage to the stones
Of Europe to prostrate before her bones.

The bones of the one who dared to touch...
The bones of the one who dared to hold...

Hold! Cried a voice as I bounded, pounded
Up the steps, set upon the iron door.
Icons of slaughter wrought upon the door,
Bound again under my fist, I pounded

Desperation! *Hold!* The wrought iron moaned,
Scraping against the stone, the fraught voice moaned
Hold! I fell through the door onto the stone,
Blood dripping from my nose onto the stone.

Blood for the one who dared to touch...
Blood for the one who dared to hold...

Hold Me Holy

Mercy! Cried a voice as my blood wept shame,
Pooling puddles of penance and pain,
Penance that stained the letters of my name
On stone: *I sin, I desecrate, I maim.*

Ransom! The voice, I craned my head to see
My blood, writhing to the reliquary.
Bones beckoned my blood, murmuring *mercy,*
Hold – Please! Take my blood, I am not wary

Of the bones of the one who dared to touch...
Of the bones of the one who dared to hold...

I wept as my blood soaked through her marrow.
I knelt as feathers burst through her marrow.
I prayed as honey dripped from her marrow:
Angel, she rose from the blood and marrow.

Holy, Holy, Holy. Holy Honey,
Holy Blood, Holy Angel, let me taste
Redemption! Marrow sweet with charity.
Angel, Holy Angel, at last, I taste

The blood of the one who dared to touch...
The blood of the one who dared to hold...

Hold Me Holy

...you're bleeding...

...I tripped...

...you didn't need to run...

...I had to tell you that I...

...I missed you...

...I'm a failure...

...I'm a monster...

...You're an Angel...

...Hold me...

Hold me Holy. Hold me Holy.

...Hold me...

But It's What We Do With It

a.j. pfeffer

(Our Father, who art in Heaven;)

It's a steadfast love we're seeking.

Lost in the storm, a squall of centuries ago we
crawled through the darkness and asked, who is that
that might see us for what we are, what we wish to be?

(Your whole life, I think You've needed to hear this—)

They walked toward it. Every step forward, a step into nothing.
They reached through time and stole Us; Themselves. I am laid
atop myself; all my sins and blessings spilled into me. After all,
you, you, you are, you are, you are dust, you are dust, you are dust,
you are dust, and god is a ghost of our repetition.

(You aren't a good person.)

We hand ourselves the scripture of our echoes.
From our pen the blood of life flowed, and a new world took
shape.

We look up. We are greeted with
a mirror.

REVEL

creature

hear the

hold

his hand

do not damage

the voice of

Death

the wild

souls

of those

slain

call out

blood

was given

wait

kill

be

complete

open

The sun

turn

the stars

shake

The sky

remove

every

man

call

us and

face

wrath

hold

the

wind

call out in
power

put a seal on

God.

PROSE

The Priest and The Wife

*inspired by John and Mildred
Grace Varley & Alexandra Ricou*

A reading from the Book of Tobit 8:4b-8:

*Blessed are you, O God of our fathers;
praised be your name forever and ever.
Let the heavens and all your creation
praise you forever.*

Praise. Praise *Him*. Him and only him, in His house, praise Him.
Those are the right words, the words that taste blessed and holy on the tip of my tongue. The words I will say, for those are the Right Words, the Good Words, the Only Words. I will say no more, for I am His and only His.

Yet, when my mind wanders as I write, when my thoughts of Him wander and settle on You. The Right You, the Good You, the Only You, then praise has a different meaning.

Praise. Praise *You*. You and only you, in His house, praise You.
My ribs are a church built in your honour, my heart is the bells that peel in your name, my soul is your chasuble, my body your scripture. I built it of my own self and furnished it of my own mind. It is yours and only yours. My love.
I giveth to you freely and readily.
I giveth myself.
To You.

*You made Adam and you gave him his wife Eve
to be his help and support;
and from these two the human race descended.
You said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone;
let us make him a partner like himself.'*

The Priest and The Wife

It is not good for the man to be alone.

My hands shake as I write. Like the rolling torrents of waves on the shore, over, and over, and over. *It is not good for the man to be alone*, He said, and in His infinite wisdom He made it so. But, what is this loneliness when it is holy, and what is this comfort when it is not?

No.

No, not sin.

Never sin.

Not with You.

Your doe eyes so quick and keen with knowledge, your soft lips so ready with kindness and mirth, your small hands so strong, and fine, and warm with pink flesh. God gave the lonely man a partner like himself and the man, oh, the man worshipped every part of her. Of *you*. Worshipped on his knees in His house. Worshipped in the back of his mind as he saw her, *you*, sitting beside the man you promised to wed, his name on your lips but my name in your beating red heart.

*Now, Lord, you know that I take this wife of mine
not because of lust,
but for a noble purpose.*

It isn't lust when you say *I love you*, it isn't lust when you *want it*. Those are the lies I tell myself so easily, so readily, so greedily, guzzling them like communion wine, like an addict, like an addict of You.

Exodus 20:17: *you shall not covet your neighbor's wife.*

But, when that wife should be yours. Is it truly a sin?

No, no, never a sin.

Never.

Not with You.

There is noble purpose in you, oh Lord, there is noble purpose in every little piece of you. If you told me you would leave, to catch the ferry to the mainland, to start a new life, oh, do you know how I would follow, my shepherd? Do you know how I would bleat your name? I sometimes dream of wedding bells, of white dresses and clasped flowers, and I would, in a heartbeat, oh love, I would.

The Priest and The Wife

*Call down your mercy on me and on her,
and allow us to live together to a happy old age.”*

They said together, “Amen, amen.”

The word of the Lord.

Mercy.

I only ask for mercy.

For her soul. For all of her soul. Her beautiful, good, *good* soul.

She will marry and I will be glad of it. The priest, the fine man, the gracious man. No sins hidden beneath my wings, no blackness in my heart. To serve the Lord and to serve His flock. My purpose. I am not that lost, little lamb. There is nothing more and there shall never be any more, and yet as I say my final *Amens* there is blackness, and there are sins, and I would slaughter this flock and drink its blood if it made you smile.

Yet it never would. Would it, young lady?

We meet in the silence, a covered world where nothing exists but ourselves, in time, in a moment. Just a moment. We might grow old, be happy, but not together. That is the word of the Lord. Not my word, not yours, but His.

He placed us here, pews apart, for a reason. For a test. One whose rules I must abide.

Tomorrow you will marry the man you love and I shall be happy for you. We will sing, and we will dance, and we will make merry, and I shall play my part. Sate my hunger. Bleed beneath my black shirt where it will only make me, *me*, smile.

When the days come and the two of you grow old, and happy, together, I will be happy, too. For in this House of the Lord, we will both know that the Right Words, the Good Words, the Only Words that will grace my lips will always and forever be yours.

The Right You, the Good You, the Only You.

Praise. Praise *You*. You and only you, in His house, praise You.

The Priest and The Wife

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 10:6-9:

Jesus said:

*“From the beginning of creation,
God made them male and female.*

*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.*

*So they are no longer two but one flesh.
Therefore what God has joined together,
no human being must separate.”*

The Gospel of the Lord.

Today, two shall become one flesh. You, my husband, will be my love and my life. I pledge myself to you in sickness and in health. You have cherished me and loved me already and I...

I can't do this. No. No

No

No...

I am yours, until death do us part.

But is it truly living if you are not with the one you love?

That's not fair, I do love him, this man, this fiancé of mine. I do love him and his ordinariness and his simplicity. Life isn't hard with him. It's a straight thread, a through line to the day when we will be old and gray and fade away together. As we should, as it should be. This man, this fiancé of mine, he loves me and I love him.

But is it the love that allows two to become one?

That sort of love, it has an alchemy to it, a property changing, metamorphosing, transmogrifying power to it. That kind of love sounds like a miracle, like Jesus turning water into wine, or a burning bush speaking the words of God to Moses. It sounds wonderful and terrifying all at the same time and that...

The Priest and The Wife

That is what love is. The love that shatters happiness and destroys comfort and obliterates reason. The kind of love that flies in the face of respectability and promises and vows. This is love.

Or is it lust?

No.

No

No...

It is love, I know it is. Everytime I think of you, everytime I look at you, I know this feeling is love. It doesn't feel like a sin, it's never felt like a sin. Never.

Sometimes I wish that you would take me away, that you would do the wrong thing. Because it is the wrong thing. It is wrong according to God, according to the vows you made. It is wrong but it doesn't feel like a sin.

No.

No

No...

I look at you across the chapel, high upon your lectern, like some great raven perched upon an ancient, insurmountable tree. I know the space between us is mere yards, mere feet from one another, but they might as well be miles, leagues, eons. I remember once reading a story about a man who would swim across a great sea to reach his lover every night. Every night, risking life and limb for the one he loves, just to be with her for a few hours and then back into the cold inky expanse to swim back to safety. When I walk the distance to the rectory, it feels like I am that man, battling the waves and the currents to be with the one I yearn for, but the tempest that holds me is not one of water but one of shame and judgement.

They will judge us. It's a small island and everyone knows everyone else's business. We would be as good as exiles, and of course we could go to the mainland, but what would there be for us? Nothing.

Everything is here, on this small patch of land in the middle of a great sea. Here is safety, here is surety.

The Priest and The Wife

I must remain here, and as I must remain, I must marry this man, this fiancé of mine. What the raven in his ancient tree decides to do is up to you. You have all the time to ponder and plan but I do not. Time is finite for me. With each passing day, week, month, I will change.

I suppose in a way, two has already become one flesh, but deep inside me. Deep in the great sea of me, moving in my inky depths. Will it love me or despise me for the circumstances of its formation? I'll never tell them. I don't think. A child should not be burdened with the sins of the father. Or the mother.

No.

No

No...

This man, this fiancé of mine will be the father as he will be my husband. I will not ruin three lives for the sake of my own happiness. Could I ever truly be happy if I did ruin their lives? This trinity of mine that I love, but each with a different kind of love.

The love of a wife.

The love of a mother.

The love of a lover.

I cannot remain the third if I am to achieve the other two. I have to decide.

I choose him.

This man.

This fiancé of mine.

I can choose no other.

I will have an ordinary life, a simple life with him. We will travel the untangled thread of husband and wife together and this child within me, this raven's child, will be his in all but blood. But what does blood matter when the flesh conceals it? No one can see the sin if it is hidden well enough.

I have made my choice, so I will become one with him.

One flesh. One whole. One family.

And there is no room for ravens here.

The girl I loved who saved me and maybe I saved her too

Bethany Walker

You are candy colored skies. Bubble-gum-sweet and ribbons-in-your-hair and laugh-as-loud-as-you-can. I am background noise. Blend-in-neutrals, don't-raise-your-hand, see-but-don't-be-seen. Your childhood is cookie-baking-giggles and sandy-beach-vacations and Christmas-presents-wrapped. Mine is grow-up-quick-education and don't-talk-back-punches and how-do-I-get-out-of-here.

You love me in a hold-me-close, tell-me-all-your-secrets way. My love is years-of-harm cautious, hesitant-steps-towards, leaps-bound-back. You don't shrink away at my don't-touch-me-sighs and trauma-colored-confessions. Midnight communions and brushed palms give way to ardent-devotion-kisses and Sunday-night-dinners.

You are revelation-worthy happily-ever-after; I am will-she-survive-till-the-last-chapter cliffhanger suspense. I lend you some perspective-wrapped-in-cozy-blankets and you teach me to take-up-some-goddamn-space-in-the-world. Together we are dusk-kissing-the-earth-goodnight, branches-reaching-to-the-sky, clinging-hand-salvation.

The End of a Small Thing

Alyson Tait

3:33 AM.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my palms into my face. When I opened them again, the clock hadn't changed. The blinking numbers felt ominous - some form of the witching hour, and outside, the wind howled. It came in strong from the ocean and smacked into the walls, trees, and anything else brave enough to be outside.

The little red lights burned as I watched them, but I refused to give anything else my attention until they turned.

3:34 AM.

I sat up. It was a slow movement with my tender, aching back and a heavy rem cycle still holding on tight to my tired mind. I had to take several deep breaths, blinking only quick beats to prevent myself from laying back down.

I knew that if I closed my eyes for too long or too many times, I would fall back asleep, and I would stay asleep until my morning alarm. I would forget to check on the sound that had woken me up. By morning time, the storm could have destroyed something fixable.

I needed to check.

3:35 AM.

Now or never.

I lifted myself up, slipped my feet into the fuzzy innards of my favorite house shoes, and walked to the front door. When I pulled it open, my first reaction was to gag.

Not two steps away from a very weathered welcome mat was the black and orange fur of my cat.

"Cammy," I whispered.

Her name came out in a mangled gurgle of sounds that I didn't recognize. For a brief moment, I hoped I was mistaken; it could be anything at all there on the ground, and it could be any cat at all laying in a puddle of its own blood, but even before I moved my feet to confirm, I knew the truth.

It wasn't just any object, and it wasn't just any cat.

The End of a Small Thing

It was my beautiful calico that I'd found at just a few weeks old, almost ten years ago, just behind my house where the fence lifts above an old gopher hole.

I had asked my ex-husband for almost two years to fix it, but we didn't last long enough for him to finish that job.

When I reached her curled-up body on my little sidewalk, it was a mix of matted and puffed-up hair.

I gagged again.

4:00 AM.

I glanced at my alarm clock as I walked back into my bedroom, and then I glanced at the bed lying there next to the end table. The cool sheets and warm blankets were calling to me - but I couldn't lay down yet.

I had pulled myself together so far. Long enough to wrap up Cammy and get her off the ground. I found my hose in the darkness and hoped that the remaining dark spot was simply water and refused to turn on the front lights to double-check.

I still needed to shower and change my clothes, and after that, well...

I still wouldn't be able to go back to sleep.

4:01 AM

I stared at the clock as it blinked. I needed to move my body before getting more dirt, water, or blood on my floors.

4:02 AM

My eyes began to burn from staring at the red lights so long without blinking.

The pain brought me back to reality, and I shook my head. A heavy breath escaped my lungs as I turned toward my closet. There was a chance I would regret my choice of putting on my church clothes when Cammy needed hefted up once more inside her temporary casket, but I felt limited in my options.

Where would I change? And how could I bring this upon the lord's doorstep looking as I did?

There was no choice. I pulled out the outfit I had already planned to wear and forced my legs to move toward the bathroom so I could shower.

5:00 AM

I zoned out at a different clock as my second cup of coffee brewed quite loudly.

The End of a Small Thing

I should have been out the door already, talking to the pastor and prepping to say farewell to Cammy, but my eyes refused to focus for a little while. I could have left after I finished half of the first cup I made, but I wanted one to go because I wasn't sure I'd get time again before service started.

I hoped no one would find me too selfish for taking the time just before mass.

I laughed.

Of course, no one would. Where else do we go in times such as these? Where else would I go to ask for the healing I needed to move on and the strength to carry out the island's will?

God's will.

Cammy needed cleansing.

5:02 AM

The coffee maker sputtered out the last few drops of black liquid into my thermos, and with that, it was time to go.

A difficult day lay ahead, and no one else would take care of what needed to be done. No one could mend my best friend, and she could no longer stay with me.

It was definitely time to go.

5:05 AM

I walked out the door as ready for the coming day as I was going to be. I made sure to lock it behind me, then hoisted Cammy into my arms, and started the walk down to the church. I didn't want to take the cat in my car, even though I knew my legs would likely ache on the way back home later that day if I didn't ask anyone for a ride.

I likely wouldn't.

My shoes were halfway sensible, at least, and they were well worn and hopefully wouldn't give me any problems. If nothing else, I always could choose a good outfit, I supposed.

My thoughts ran in circles about mundane things until I reached the door of the church, and there they stopped cold, along with my feet. I looked at the wooden behemoths in front of me and knew I would need to knock at least, but I wasn't sure how, with Cammy in my arms. I didn't want to put her down any more than I had wanted to lug her over in my car or bring her inside my apartment, so I picked up a leg and did something I feared would get me immediately stricken by lightning.

Smote where I stood, certainly.

I kicked the door in lieu of knocking.

The End of a Small Thing

5:25 AM

I checked my watch when my hands were free, wondering if I would disrupt the morning service after all.

I let my hand fall and looked at the small raft we had made for Cammy and her little body, wrapped in my welcome mat and then some plastic grocery bags as they floated on the water.

The island had given me my husband and taken him away to a new wife. The island had also given me my best friend, and the island had taken her back away.

Even if it were gruesome and unfitting for the small, cuddly creature.

Still, it seemed fitting that the island sent her away, as well.

It was simply the way things were here. We trusted our guts, the ocean to be unpredictable, and the word of God. With those things to guide me, I knew that I would heal, and I would be allowed to ask for a new companion sent my way.

6:00 AM

The bells rang out across the island, and we were blessed with Sunday mass starting exactly when it was supposed to.

Despite the grief and rolling confusion in my gut, I felt relieved that I hadn't overburdened the others around me, but the feeling only lasted a short while. Sometime later, after many songs and the bulk of the pastor's lesson, as my hands reached out to take my communion, I realized they were both still somehow covered in blood.

Holy Dirt

Dr. Bunny McFadden

The pilgrimage to El Santuario de Chimayó began with something unholy: Gas station burritos from Allsup's. They sat in her backpack, calling to her. Loretta's grandmother walked ahead of them in the procession, still seething over the breakfast pitstop.

"I haven't eaten since yesterday," Loretta muttered, but it was useless. The viejita practically had steam rising from her hunched shoulders. She was probably still angry that Loretta didn't take communion at the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Loretta checked her watch. They were six hours in. Three to go if they could convince Grandma to sit in the damn wheelchair instead of hobbling ahead of them. They might even get there before dawn. She peeled the foil from the hot tortilla. Silver bits stuck to it ominously. Her brother walked next to her in the dark, hands clasped.

"Do you want yours? You haven't eaten since communion."

Elijah's face was blank.

"Suit yourself," she said, unwrapping her burrito.

"Do you ever wonder if you've accidentally eaten the Virgin Mary?" Loretta asked before taking a massive bite. "Like, she came to you on a tortilla and you just straight up ate it without knowing?" she said, mouth full.

A sudden honk made both of them jump, and Loretta had to cough to clear the egg in her throat. The cars usually slowed for the pilgrims, but each year more Californians moved in and saturated the roads with aggression.

"You'll get to the end soon," their grandmother called after the disappearing offender, her voice righteous and unusually clear.

Elijah's head was still bent in contemplation. She felt guilty for a moment. Maybe she shouldn't joke with him yet. He was so solemn now.

She was about to take another bite to fill the silence when her brother started to speak.

"Loretta," he hesitated, digging his hand through his tidy black hair. "I didn't tell you this because I haven't had the words to say it. Last year, the Virgin came to me."

Loretta laughed an ugly and immediate snigger. They'd grown up poking fun at Grandma, vowing to never believe in all that stuff. Now here was her criminal brother, fresh out of prison and trying to preach to her.

Holy Dirt

"I'm not playing. She came to me," he insisted.

"When? Did she show up in the cell toilet where you were making hooch?"

Her brother fell silent. Up ahead, Grandma was stock-still. She'd overheard.

Loretta's skin immediately flooded with cold sweat.

Grandma turned slowly, not from age but anger.

"I'm sorry," Elijah called. "We weren't arguing, Grandma. I promise."

He was the only one who could calm the old woman down when she got like that. He helped her into the wheelchair and kept walking. Loretta knew she wouldn't be able to open her mouth for hours now. Something about these moments always silenced her. Behind them, a man carrying a heavy wooden cross cleared his throat to pass.

#

The holy dirt was once free for the taking but now they'd sectioned it off, commodified it. Loretta remembered that when she was a child, a priest sat in a rusted folding chair watching the pilgrims. Now in the predawn dark, there was a clean white tent, the kind you might see at a football tailgate for the Lobos.

Down the paved sidewalk a bit, folks rested. Crosses were strewn about. The *penitentes* were alive and well in this part of New Mexico. Grandma was praying in the chapel.

Loretta tried to talk with her brother.

"I'm sorry for earlier, Elijah. You said you saw her? When?"

"Well," he started. "It was in the middle of the night and I was alone. At first, I thought it was a dream." Already Loretta found herself frowning in skepticism. "Don't start," he said. "I knew you were gonna be like this. I ain't making this up. She came to me." He looked at Loretta in earnest. He hadn't looked like that in a long time.

"It was like a dream at first. I didn't know she was talking to me. She kept saying I needed to get up. It sounded like a warden, all slick and commanding, but then I remembered thinking they don't employ women."

Loretta sucked air in, disbelief sharp on her teeth.

"So it was a dream?"

"Not like that," Elijah continued. "It was harsher. I could feel how cold the edge of the bunk was. I could hear my neighbor snore. When I dreamt, I couldn't feel all that. That's how I know she was coming to me. I felt the bruises from a fight that day. I felt real. Awake. And she came to me to tell me to stay strong."

"Stay strong? Against what?"

Holy Dirt

They silently chewed on old corners of tortilla.

“It’s such a joke how they’re selling this dirt,” Loretta started.

The priest was suddenly behind them.

“All of that money goes right back to the people of this village,” the priest said. “I use it to keep the children well-fed, to buy them clothing when their shoes get worn out.”

Loretta felt a rush of shame that kept her from retorting.

“Let’s find Grandma,” Elijah said, sensing her mood.

The bells tolled. It was nearing dawn. The priest and Elijah walked together closely, two birds of a flock.

“I’ll see you in there,” she said, but she wasn’t sure they even heard her.

The sun was near the horizon. She never burned as a kid but the soft morning light was prickling her. Loretta crumpled the foil from her burrito and started the hunt for a trash can; there was usually one around the side of the chapel where morning flies buzzed, but they’d cleaned up the place and she couldn’t find it. Her skin itched. The chapel wouldn’t have a trash can. She stuck the foil in her pocket and looked around.

From the road, pilgrims came in waves. The crowd had built up, gathering closer and closer. Before, there were few. Now there was a mass of people clamoring to get closer to the holy dirt. Loretta felt claustrophobic, her chest tight under her warm hoodie. She debated stripping it off. There were a few tattoos her grandmother hadn’t seen yet, and she wasn’t sure Good Friday was the right time for the reveal, even if the holiday was about forgiveness.

“The call for penitence around this time of the year brings even the farthest straying flock members back,” called out the priest. Murmurs drew to a close slowly. The elders took a bit longer, hearing aids and fogged eyes delaying their attention.

He stood in front of a heavy wooden door. It was carved into; the artist marked a sacred heart chained tightly with a woven bind of thorns. The doors seemed to tremble. The sun had not yet risen; the light made his skin look ashen. He walked slowly from the doors to the outside amphitheater. This is where Loretta remembered sermons being held when she was a kid. There were simply too many pilgrims to fit into the chapel.

“This is the same dirt the *Penitentes* cherished, the holiest, the mark of saints and angels,” he called. “And it is the dirt that will protect you. With this, you walk unhindered in the light. Hold it in your hands,” he called. “Have faith.” Behind him, the sun dramatically began to rise. At once, screeches of agony filled the air.

Holy Dirt

“The dirt,” cried the priest. “Hold your native dirt!” And still, dozens of tourists, even those holding the sacred vials, burst into clouds of silty ash. It was panic. Someone screamed in her ear, and she threw up her hands to protect herself, but the crowd was too tightly packed.

Loretta ran blindly into the Santo Niño church. The screams outside went on and on. She didn’t think it was possible for someone to scream that long. It didn’t even sound human. She crouched among the rows of children’s shoes. Behind her, the empty shoes were stacked and crowding the *bulto*.

“Santo Niño,” she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

When she was a child, Grandma told her that Santo Niño would always protect her. He was the child who wandered this area bringing bread and water to anyone who needed it. Loretta called his name again.

A barefoot boy at the door beckoned to her.

“Don’t be scared,” he said. “Walk with me.”

She followed him outside, where the morning sunlight shone on the piles of dust.

Some pilgrims were spared. They looked around, bewildered.

“They’re from here,” Grandma said from the shadow of the chapel door. “They were spared because that dirt is theirs.”

Loretta bent down to gather it in her hands.

#

At night, they went into the hills to dig. There were lines of them, blood dripping from their shoulders where they’d flayed themselves. Below, the priest groaned in quiet hunger.

Madness & Guilt

L.C. Star

The man in the scratchy prison clothes stares at the imagined crystals before him. Filth lies underneath him along with an empty plate beneath him. His head was empty other than thoughts of water and moss.

Words etched on stone blur together and imagine a pair of beautiful young girls - one with light skin and another with darker skin. One was young and another a teenage girl like him, at the time.

How many years has it been?

How long has his mind been gone?

“Bless me father, for I have sinned. It has been ten years since my last confession. These are my sins.”

“You’re repeating yourself, Adam. You’re confessing again.” A voice responds, but the words would never reach him. The voice clears their throat as they realized how foolish they were: a man like Adam is doomed to repeat his confessions until some piece would find his mind.

“When I was six years old, I fell in love with a servant girl and she was of a lower class than me. She was beautiful, O Lord, and forgive me for imagining her with eyes of impurity.” His voice cracked and creaked. His green eyes didn’t know what he looked for in the darkened ceiling above him.

“I wanted to swim with her and be equal to her. Not her of higher class and me of lower; we would be of one class. Something like that wouldn’t define us. She was a pale beauty and her dark was of ebony.”

Adam huffs as tears streams down his hollowed cheeks. If the scar on his cheek burns, Adam never reacts.

As he recounts the crime for the umpteenth time, the priest on the other side of the prison cells adjusts his seat and releases a sigh.

Every day, he’d come in here and listen to the same confessional over and over. The young man had lost his mind after seeing a child’s grave and he escorted someone to the town of Quickstar. She had reported his madness to the local church as the madness scared her.

Madness & Guilt

She had since disappeared as priests and other apostles and hardly anyone in town recognized her.

The mad priest, Adam, called her a 'reincarnated witch' and still claims she had bewitched him. He claims she had a book of spells to take a corpse and wear them in a different light.

Once again, there wasn't any proof.

In order to heal him, he was sent to these jails and this man would sit by his cell and listen to his confessions. And it was the same story over and over.

"And I froze. I didn't know what to do at the time. But when I found the ability to run, I grabbed her father. He was shocked and couldn't be angry at me and the search began."

As much as it was important to understand his beginnings, the priest's job was to find out how it ended.

Why did he end up mad?

Was this truly a cause of bewitchment or a sudden bout of guilt?

The man never spoke of witches unless that name leaves his lips.

"And even though my eyes knew she was gone, she looked so peaceful with the lilies. I suggested putting that on her tombstone... and I was shocked to find out they did."

His usual sigh escapes and the priest shifts.

"... And I am truly sorry for all of my sins."

"And what of the witch?"

"Oh, that girl was kind as she was beautiful. But if Josephina grew up, she'd be as beautiful as her. Her eyes - I still remember them."

Shocked, the priest listens to these new words quietly.

"Explain yourself, sir," the priest says. Finally, he was excited to hear about what happened on that day.

The man never leaves his spot.

"I have confessed my sins, Father. I cannot talk about her."

"You must confess to these sins as well." He insists.

Another sigh escapes the prisoner.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been... forgive me, I don't remember how long it's been, since my last confession. These are my sins."

Madness & Guilt

This time, the priest listens more intently than before.

“When I was six years old, I fell in love with a servant girl and she was of a lower class than me. She was beautiful, O Lord, and forgive me for imagining her with eyes of impurity.”

With perfect diction, as though he'd never confessed it a hundred times before, the man croaks out the same exact confession the priest heard just earlier.

“Give thanks to the Lord for He is good.”

“His mercy endures forever.”

“Your sins are forgiven. I will go in peace.”

“Thanks be to God.”

The priest finally leaves and returns to his post. With his thinning hair, he looks back at the hole he'd just exit out of. The jails had prisoners of war, heathens, and those who had lost their way. He finds himself walking towards the exit of the building with frustrated thoughts in his head as he considers the man who always repeats himself.

“Monsignor Guji,” a nun calls out to the man. He turns with his grey eyes and sees a nun named Emeline. Her blond hair peaks from her habit and green eyes stare at him from behind her glasses. “How is he doing?” She's smart in her whispers as she directs her eyes momentarily behind him.

“Unfortunately, he's still gone. There was a moment of lucidity where he was about to speak about the girl.” He runs his hand over his head and into his rising hairline. His black hair starts to grey from the stress of his life-long profession and more easily, his face folds at any wrinkles. “But he started again.”

“Sounds like progress to me,” the nun exclaims as she turns to walk with him. “He has a long way to go, I fear.” She nods as she closes her eyes. After she was finished, she glances back at the priest and awaits his response.

“I must confess, dear sister, that his madness is starting to rub off of me. Is this a way for a priest such as myself to act? I shouldn't be so weak as to allow a singular man's madness affect me like that.”

Madness & Guilt

“Monsignor Guji, you are such a kind man to allow another man’s guilt occupy your mind, but you must remember it is only guilt he feels.”

“Are you sure it’s not just his madness?”

“I’m sure; you have the advantage of another human soul instead of bars.”

“I have prisoner bars of madness brewing from listening to the same story for months! Sister, there has to be another way!”

“Calm yourself, calm yourself... Emotions are powerful enough as it is but trust the process. If you must cleanse yourself, the confessional is available and you can always entrust your guilt to Him.”

The man’s grey eyes relax as he releases a sigh.

“No, but you’re right. I’m confusing his madness for guilt.”

“The Lord watches us all and he watches the weak, especially. He will eventually talk when he is ready. Perhaps, you should be able to rest for the rest of the day.”

“But what about the service?”

“No worries; we can reschedule it for tonight. Would midnight be appropriate?”

A whisper escapes his lips as he considers the option.

“Yes,” he pauses before sweat beads on his forehead. He reaches in for his handkerchief and dabs at it. “Yes, that would be wise. Thank you.”

For the rest of the day, the Monsignor prays his own madness and guilt away as he includes the boy in his prayers. He rubs his rosary and wishes in his usual ritual that madness and guilt would finally release their vice-like grip on both of their hearts.

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

Kevin Woodley

Father Paul brought his palms together.

I waited with great intensity.

‘Thank you all for coming today. A blessed day from our Lord and Saviour. Feel His spirit in the air, feel it move through your heart and lift the weight from your soul.’

With a quick step back, Father Paul took on a stranger, greater posture. His focus drifted away from us, deep in total conviction. The room went silent.

He began without warning, as all wondrous things did.

‘And after he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Eat it.’ Remember me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Drink it. Remember me.”’

He paused, looked deep into every person in the room. ‘Remember me, Christ said to them.’

When his eyes settled upon me, I found myself turning to David—not entirely to avoid Father’s gaze, although that was part of it, but to see David’s, in this moment of all the moments we had been moving towards. It filled me with joy to witness him like this, heart-pounding, enraptured, and submitting to change. He’d truly given in to this new life of ours. We finally belonged. I craved this; the island, the rituals, and rhythm, its guiding hand, deep within the embrace of a watery solitude and the Church that punctured the sky. We were led here by God.

Father Paul breathed heavily and danced backward again, revving himself up, wild-eyed—even handsome in the warm spring light.

He bellowed in the great hall: ‘This is my body given to you!’, and cried, ‘This is my blood poured into you!’

And we sang back.

‘This is my body given to you!’

‘This is my blood poured into you!’

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

And Father Paul roared again: 'Remember me!'

And we sang back: 'Remember me!'

And the whole Church was alight with song, once voice, one body and soul.

There was a great swell, then a crash and release of pulsing lungs, hot faces, and tearful joy. I dug my nails into David's palm. I was so completely happy.

The room settled softly like falling dust.

We made the walk to Father Paul and took the communion, one by one. Father Paul offered me his hand. 'Body of Christ.' I took the little wafer sleeping inside, which dissolved on my tongue. He offered me the cup that swirled deep red with the life of our Lord. 'Blood of Christ.' I drank gratefully.

The sweetness of the wine lingered as I joined David in the mouth of the Church entrance. Sunshine swept through the courtyard; in its rays lingered the crispness of fresh leaves and the heady stillness of a wonderful new day. I relaxed into his arms, at peace with the thump of his beating heart, so loud it seemed it could be my own. We looked at each other, and in that moment, I wanted so much to absorb everything at once; the way the light sank then bloomed beneath his skin, every shade, shimmer, and mark inside his eyes, even the way his teeth peeked through his lips whenever he smiled. I had an urge to eat this entire memory and keep it inside me forever.

He put his hand on my face and tickled my neck with a kiss.

'I'm so happy to be here,' I said, and David led me out of the churchyard.

The damp signature he'd left on my neck had planted a divine thought in my head, and I had not been able to free it from my mind. It had grown roots deep inside of me, mingling with relics of wonder and tantalising scripture, now unearthed into the light by Father Paul's sermon. I had wondered long, on my own, about how we could not only learn from God but really feel Him in our bones. Father Paul's inspiring voice and David's kiss had shown me the new path.

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

I said to David, 'I think this morning was the best I've ever felt—here with you and the church, and that maybe this is the way it was always meant to be.' I asked him: 'Did you feel it too?'

He put his knife and fork down and smiled across the table. 'Each day with you is my favourite day,' he said. 'There's a passage that's stuck with me recently—'

I already knew what it was. It slid right off of my tongue. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." And as I said this, it was a voice that I knew to be my own, and yet it was as if I was only now hearing it for the first time.

'That's the one. And that's how I know we're meant to be, just you and I,' he grinned cheerfully. 'Together.'

'And always,' I finished.

'It was intense today,' he said.

I nodded. 'The kiss on my neck surprised me. I liked it.'

He ruffled his hair. I'd embarrassed him somehow. 'Oh, well... with how the Mass went... and the sun shining like that... I wanted to memorialise it.'

'Do you think... I've been wondering... Something Father said today...'

'Spit it out,' he laughed. Always a soft laugh, like he was afraid of disturbing the air.

I took a deep breath and spread my wings: 'The Book talks about this idea of giving ourselves truly to the other, true commitment. About how Our Lord Jesus Christ gave his blood and poured himself into all the people he loved. And since we are made in God's image like He was... And we love each other...'

He waited for me to finish.

'David, I want to share our love the way that Christ did. I cannot bear to imagine a life without you. It wouldn't be true. It wouldn't be the world as I needed it. I want to give all of myself to you, and all of you to remain inside of me... David, I want you to bite me.'

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

When Sunday came, I felt reborn as we took our places in the church again. There was a chill in the spring air, but we did not feel it much due to the scarves coiled around our necks. In the grip of a feverish mood, I could feel my face blossom and burn a blood red. I felt engulfed in David's love and the love of our Lord. And as Father Paul began the morning Mass, the boy that had grown up to be my husband placed his hand above my knee. He did not raise it higher, but it was electrifying to have it resting there. A sunbeam pierced the stained-glass windows to my side, bursting through the chest of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The sun exploded through him, washing David and me in brilliant light, holy light, God light. I was a lovestruck teen again, punctured with love bites and secret pleasures and fulfilled desires; like the universe had arranged itself entirely for us to take, and use, and fill. Smiling big and bright, I tasted the sunlight. I bit into the rays. And once I tasted the gold light, I opened a slit in the side of my lip and turned it red.

David squeezed my thigh. I tilted my head to one side and he to the other, and we loosened the threads secured around our throats. I scrunched the scarf into my hands. In the sunlight, as Father Paul's voice boomed mightily, shone all the marks David had left upon me. David's glistened too, darkly wonderful tree-knots in the flesh; the story of our passion for each other and our Lord printed into skin. David had done as I had asked and committed himself fully to me and to God. In return, I had poured myself into him. Life merged, and we became a greater whole, a single, beating heart, the heart of God. It was the night we knew our love was true because there was nothing else to give. We emptied and filled ourselves until the sun rose, waking, giving, and taking. It was a total display of devotion and sacrifice. It was *worship*.

And feeling all this, my gaze drifted to Father Paul's, eager for his immense attention. And yet, his eyes did not shine upon me. They were dark and unyielding. In a jolt of panic, the light on my face turned cold. I watched the sun hide in a sudden birth of clouds. David's hand on my thigh retreated, leaving a hollow memory. With Father Paul looking at me like that, I saw a great fire burning within him, but it was not the light of God. I avoided his

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gaze and searched for David's. I needed him. Was he unravelling too? The scarf felt like limp, discarded skin in my hands. The small slits in my neck stung. It was like Father pulled them apart with his eyes, making them anew and looking inside, only he did not find what I was hoping I had planted there. Mass ended with whispers. Guilt burned my face, but it was fury that took flight. Who were they to tell us how to love?

That night, no matter how much we fed the flames, the fireplace would not warm our house up. Shivering in an embrace, we clung to each other's body heat. Slowly, my muscles relaxed, blood flowing hot through nourished veins. I always felt safe when David held me. Suddenly, no place was too cold, no pain too great. Love is a lifejacket: it keeps you afloat. The only way you can sink is through a manufacturing fault, or if you start poking holes.

I watched David intensely, trying to catch a glint of his thoughts. His heart pounded. And mine felt like it was going to explode. The rage from the rejection of the church had not dimmed. I clasped him by his bristled cheeks and planted a kiss on his lips—just a little one.

And then I said it again, and for only the second time: 'I want you to bite me.'

He was hesitant, still spurned by the morning's shadow.

My hand on his cheek, stroking his Adam's Apple, I said it again: 'I want you to bite me, David,' but added new and dangerous ingredients: 'Deeper, this time.'

'Do you think what we're doing is wrong?' he asked.

I felt hot again. Frustrated. Anxious. 'No, I love you, and I love God. This is God's will.'

I tilted my head. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him"—it's all there... I know you feel it too.'

'Are you sure?' He hadn't moved a muscle.

'Wholly,' I answered.

Parting his jaws, he revealed his teeth to me. He treated me like I was overripe fruit, afraid that if he bit too hard, I'd burst all over. But I trusted

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him, and I believed in our love for each other and for Christ too. There was tenderness to the way he leaned into the crook of my neck and lined his teeth up. But I grew impatient. I jerked hard into the pointed pricks of his mouth. He sunk deep and the blood flowed. My heart thumped its own sermon.

When he released me in a fountain of red delirium, my head snapped back, dizzy with God's light. He was struggling to breathe, but this was no time to stop. I could feel the Lord so close... David swallowed my blood impatiently to clear his lungs and offered his neck.

We made holes faster than we could fill. Each bite went deeper, ran darker, and was more dangerous than the last. Arms and legs coiled, we tightened like a strange and ravenous plant. But quicker than we realised, far beyond the soaking of our clothes and the staining of our skin, our airways clogged up. We were no longer breathing, could only suck and drain and fill. So deep now, all we could do was carry on digging. That was the scariest thing of all. We didn't even know if we'd ever find anything at the end. We kept digging, searching for God's love below the surface of ourselves, but the more we looked, the less we could see. The room went dark and cold.

There was a scream.

And another, maybe mine.

We cried as we bled.

But we did not release each other. Not yet. The hope of finding an answer was the only thing holding us together.

Bundled in a heap, we trembled in each other's arms. We clung on because we didn't know what would happen if we let go. The room felt emptier than it had before. Closing my eyes, I gave everything to the person I loved. That's all you can really do in life. Trembling, we rocked in the cold firelight, blood pooling at our feet.

Then, without realising it, we had peeled away from each other as if gently pushed by an unseen force. My chest heaved violently with pain. I wasn't breathing properly, but no miracle ever came without sacrifice. I turned my head—just a little bit.

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

‘David?’ I called.

I wondered if he couldn’t hear me because of the gashes in my throat. Was I still making all the right sounds?

‘My love?’ I called.

No answer.

His eyes might have been open. His lips were surely moving. I couldn’t know because I couldn’t see his face—he was turned the wrong way.

‘David, please talk to me,’ I called.

But when I reached out, I saw him lift up and into a halo of pulsing light. God had swept his brush across our room, alive and brilliant light, glowing in the air—blue, red, blue, red, blue, red. And yet the angels’ song was not kind. They wailed in heart-stopping horror.

Then they took my love away.

Standing in the doorway, I saw Father Paul looking down at me. But the more I looked, the more I saw. And I saw a man who was sad, afraid, and alone. I saw a man who had come to help and had come too late.

And all I could do was pray that God would take me, that David was waiting for me in the great mouth of another doorway, and this time, when we walked through, we would stay together, forever and always because that’s what we had promised.

In the cold dark of the room, Father Paul’s gold gown shimmered. He took a step back from the blood pool seeping its way out of the house.

I trembled, reaching out a bloodied hand.

‘Abide with me.’ I cried. ‘Abide with me.’

Exsultet

Tyler Norton

Like a skulk of foxes, the parishioners of St. John the Apostle gather in darkness. They shuffle into pews, clutching unlit candles, fingers trembling with excitement, with anticipation, with faith that something holy separates this night from all other nights.

The crackling of the bonfire in the parking lot pours into the sanctuary. An AV tech rigged up a microphone outside so the PA system would project the opening prayer indoors. While the congregation waits, the staticky snapping and crackling of embers sounds like one of those video Yule logs, except it's not Christmas. It's the Easter Vigil, which happens to be Darla Creed's favorite night of the year.

She sits in the back, in her usual spot, beneath the stained-glass portrait of St. Paul. Having returned to the Church in her late forties—seeking refuge in the stability, in the routine, in the ritual—she believes she owes a certain fidelity to him. Darla doesn't recall ever consciously leaving the Church because her family hardly participated in it in the first place. She does, however, remember feeling thunderstruck after walking into St. John's on a late August evening three years ago, when every self-help, guided meditation, new-age spirituality failed to quell her midlife anxiety. She signed up for an RCIA course the next morning.

Darla hears the censer clicking and swinging in the entryway; the incense swells, filling the air with a pleasing fragrance, a woody aroma. She breathes it in and savors it, practically tasting the perfume on her lips and on her tongue.

As an added bonus, this seat gives her the first glimpse at the processional, the highlight of the service. Father Crosby strides in with the Paschal candle; he sees her and offers a quick smile. It was two years ago at this celebration he confirmed her into the Church. Excitement builds up, this is the moment she's been waiting for. He shares the flame with the parishioners at the end

Exsultet

of the aisle, light from light, and the room brightens under the orange glow of a hundred flickering candles. Darla recognizes the neighbors in her pew, friendly acquaintances she's made over the last couple of years. She wonders if they know she has a family.

The boyish priest with curly blonde hair begins to chant:

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven; Exult, let angel ministers of God exult.

Darla wishes her family would join her, of course. She asks them every week to come to mass with her, even though she knows they'll rebuff her. They never made sense of her hard turn into religion: her husband said it was just a phase; her twins called it a cry for help.

Let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud our mighty king's triumph.

At first she worried about them. The Church spells it out clearly: all baptized Catholics have an obligation to attend Sunday mass and Holy Days. Failure to do so results in a state of grave sinfulness. As the melting wax drips onto her fingertips, she wanders into the dark recesses of her mind, a cave just like Christ's tomb, where she remembers those early days, those fears and anxieties. Even the laxest of non-observant Catholics make it to church on Christmas and Easter, she used to think.

Let all corners of the Earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness.

Every night she prayed that they'd come to their senses. Every night she prayed and asked for wisdom. Every night she prayed and asked for answers. And when the answer finally came, at the Easter Vigil last year, she prayed and asked for the strength to carry out God's will.

Let this holy building shake with joy.

Darla grins. She can't be upset that they're not here, not anymore.

And pouring out His own dear blood, wiped clean the record of our ancient sinfulness.

She can't be upset because tonight is perfect. It's all perfect: The music! The lights! The very transformation from death into new life!

Our birth would have been no gain had we not been redeemed.

It's all so clear. It doesn't matter her family strayed from the Lord's path. She figures they must be sinful for any sort of redemption to take place. Now they just need a little shepherding, someone to put them back on track.

Exsultet

This is the night of which it is written...

And what better night to make the correction than on the Easter Vigil, the night death loses its battle with humankind?

The sanctifying power of this night dispels wickedness...

...through the crack she made in the flue pipe.

Washes faults away...

Darla takes a deep breath, the incense still lingers in the air, filling her nose and delighting her senses. She loves this part of the chant. Sure, washing implies water, but gas works fine, too.

Restores innocence to the fallen...

She knows they'll fall asleep soon. When they wake up, they will be in communion with the saints, celebrating this night among the heavenly hosts and angelic choirs.

And joy to mourners.

She recalls her favorite passage, from the closing of Revelation, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away."

Therefore, O Lord, we pray you, that this candle, hallowed to the honor of your name, may preserve undimmed, to overcome the darkness of this night.

Darla frowns as sirens race outside the church. They're interrupting the best part, she thinks. She focuses, trying not to miss Father Crosby as he chants:

May this flame be found still burning by the morning star.

No luck. Her mind still wanders. She checks her phone for the time.

Just after ten o'clock.

It won't be long now.

death of a heavenly host

K.N. McDougall

The rain came down in sheets so thick that David couldn't have stopped in time, even if he'd seen the thing hurtling down towards his pickup. It hit his hood with a clap of thunder and sent the tires squealing over wet pavement. Smoking rubber clogged his nose as he tried desperately to control his vehicle. It fishtailed, spun all the way around, and came to a grinding halt into the side of the mountain.

Ears ringing, David checked to see if he had any bits of metal sticking out of him. He didn't, so he stared out of his windshield instead, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. The person-sized dent in his hood stared back, unblinking. There was blood there, too. Red and wet and quickly washing away under the relentless stream of water.

David cursed under his breath and opened the driver's side door. The low hum of his music was immediately drowned out by the rain, the cold slicing into his light flannel. He got out without reaching for his umbrella and walked to the front of his car. He stopped and stared.

It looked like a man; in the vague way someone might say a man looked if they hadn't seen one in quite a while. Long, golden hair matted to the side of its head with blood, cascaded down to the white, cinched sheet that covered its body in the approximation of a toga. What stopped David were the wings. Giant, blindingly-white wings that resembled a dove's, if someone had scaled them up substantially.

It's fake, David thought immediately. *Someone recognized me at that rally, and they sent this to me as a sick joke.* But the blood running from its head wasn't fake, and the way his truck was steaming, smoke failing to billow out in the torrential rain—well, that wasn't fake either.

David took two steps forward, but the picturesque figure on the road didn't so much as twitch, so he stepped forward again. He put a booted foot into the thing's side and pushed. It felt real, and warm and alive. Heat radiated off it like it had truly crashed through the atmosphere but had somehow escaped the fire.

He crouched down, water soaking into his jeans immediately and reached forward towards the thing's neck. There was a pulse there, in the same exact spot as it would be if it were human. He jerked his hand back as a wave of nausea rolled over him. It was alive, and it looked... well. It looked like an angel, the way they were painted when people didn't read the bible at all.

death of a heavenly host

David lurched back up to his feet and went to his pickup. His hand skimmed over the umbrella to his shotgun. He picked it up and checked to make sure the shells were waiting inside, and took it back out to the angel. He lined it up in his sights.

When David got back to the mainland, it took him a year to admit to himself that he was a victim of spiritual abuse. He'd heard the ads on the radio, with the woman's sad voice and the even sadder music playing in the background and he'd scoffed. *He* couldn't be one of them, he had to be stronger than all that.

But when he woke up in cold sweat after cold sweat, dreaming of pinprick teeth scraping against his carotid artery and leather wings against gold-threaded fabric; of being trapped in a rowboat for an eternity, he realized that he might have a problem.

His aunt sent him to a psychologist, who, of course, didn't believe a word of it. *Hallucinations are common*, she'd said. *With what you have described—with the level of manipulation you were subjected to, I can imagine that he could have told you the sky was purple, and you would have looked up one day to see it that way.*

He stopped seeing her and took with him the methods to cope. Five years later, he finally stopped waking up in cold sweats and only thought he heard the angel on his roof once a week. *Hypervigilance*, they called it. *Post-traumatic stress disorder*. Well, whatever it was, he could live with it.

He never stopped hearing the sermons, those evil, twisted words clogging up his brain, whispering things to him that he had no right hearing, no matter how many five things he could see, four things he could hear, three things he could touch—

He couldn't take the safety off. His finger hovered over it, pressed and rubbed at it like a touchstone, but he couldn't quite make himself do it. *Fuck this*, he thought. He lowered it. The angel sprawled, uncaring of his dilemma.

One of its wings was bent at an awkward angle, like the raven that had hit their window during one of the storms and then drowned. David had a vivid recollection of pressing sopping the feathers back into place, how it had made an awful, wet crunch, and he'd dropped the bird. His mom had run over, shouting at him about plague and bird flu. He didn't know where it had been buried.

death of a heavenly host

This time, he paused before reaching out. But there wasn't anything on this cold mountain pass to stop him, so he reached for the feathers. They were soft, even soaked through with water, and he pressed the sodden feathers together.

Another wave of nausea rolled over him as he thought of the way the angel had grabbed his mother and torn straight through her throat. He jumped back, reaching for his gun, and clicked the safety off in one, deft movement.

He realized—as he failed to line the creature up in his sights—that his hands were shaking.

When things had worked, for the brief, shining moment that they had, David had been cherished as an altar boy. The Father's hands cupping his cheeks on Ash Wednesday, pressing the soot into his forehead—*remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*—and the way he had turned that shining smile onto him.

If they had called *him* an angel, no one would have disputed it. God-sent, miracle worker who had turned their sad little island into something *beautiful, worthwhile*—and maybe the people wanted to feel beautiful and worthwhile too.

But in between the patches of those sunlight, David had seen the roiling darkness. The bouts of sickness that he tried to hide from the congregation, the way the communion wine had started tasting different, a bit too much like the Blood of Christ. Odd, tense words shared between the select group of people closest to the Father.

David had wanted to be part of that, to let the Father lean on him when he needed. But the closer he drifted, the more faith he lost in the miracles he so desperately wanted to believe in.

With the introduction of the midnight masses, David had looked around to see if anyone else saw the foul, festering pitch-black that shaped the faith into whatever the congregation wanted. But there had been nothing but a gold glint in everyone's eye, even before it was there in the flesh. The sermons became increasingly alarming, but no one wanted to let go of everything good. Surely someone able to create miracles wasn't capable of *twisting words* to serve his own ends.

David had brought it up, terrified and wanting reassurance more than answers. The Deacon had looked at him almost taken aback, her already small mouth had shriveled in on itself in distaste and she'd raised her hand. The slap was still a shock to remember, with enough force behind it to send him stumbling back. He'd seen

death of a heavenly host

true hatred in her eyes, and his cheekbone had throbbled for days after. For a pious woman of God, she was a right bitch.

You dare question the glory of God? Of these miracles gifted to us? You, too have been blessed but you would spit it back into His face.

Everything fell into place in that moment, the last of his childhood innocence fading away in the face of the utter madness that was running unchecked on the island. He was taught that the adults knew best; that they were wise and just and could always tell when things were so black-and-white, good-and-evil. But what happened when the all-knowing adults were certifiably batshit-insane, and driven there by a misguided speaker of the faith?

When it had all culminated into that awful night, the one that David fought so hard not to think about *ever*, he hadn't taken the poison that was promised to give him eternal life.

For the first time in his life, he had turned his back on the faith after a lifetime of half-believing and convincing himself that it was all a load of junk. It had saved him.

David lowered the gun and pressed his eyes shut. He tried to calm his clanging thoughts, but all he could hear were words he'd spent half a lifetime repressing.

What did it make him, following in the footsteps of the congregation? They had picked and chosen what they wanted to hear, spinning it up into a tale that made sense until you started picking apart the corners.

Who was he, to sit out in this rain with an unknown creature that looked nothing like the one that had torn apart his life, and pass judgement? Would he be any better than any of them, if he took justice into his own hands and tried to interpret events he couldn't fully understand?

He stared down his sights, to the motionless creature, shaking in and out of range, and wondered if he could even do it; pull the trigger when it looked so human.

No. He flung the shotgun away, and it felt like breaking free of chains he hadn't known had shackled him. He got up, legs so wobbly he wondered if he even had the strength to do what he needed to.

He waited for the next wave of nausea, of body-memory so vivid that it would make him freeze, but it didn't come. He crouched over the angel again and gathered it up into his arms.

death of a heavenly host

It was poetic, in a sense. He'd spent so many years fleeing the supernatural after having it proven to exist time and time again in a small town of people who all believed already. But it had hunted him down and sought him out after he'd been one of the few to escape. If there was a God, he would be laughing right about now.

The angel was light in his arms, bird-like. The weight of the leather-winged creature was a press that he still remembered, and he let out a shuddering breath. *This isn't the same, you aren't there.* He repeated that as a mantra as he began walking back to the rally of rabid believers claiming that angels walked among us, to give them exactly what they wanted. Proof.

They would see it as him admitting defeat after years of searching for definite proof that God didn't exist, fighting tooth and nail against their crazed ideology. He would be better than them. He *would*.

The angel twitched in his arms. He almost dropped it but stopped dead in the road. The rain seemed to pause and wait too, misting onto his face instead of punishing him.

With a great indrawn breath, the angel opened its eyes. It was impossible to miss the way they caught his taillights, reflecting gold like an old friend. *No*, David thought. *This isn't right.*

Indifferent to his plight, the angel exposed sharp teeth when it smiled. "Be not afraid, I am your salvation," it said.

His gun was too far away.

Acts 16:25

Gabrielle Roessler

The only reason I'm *here* is because it's the only place within walking distance that has working AC and I can enjoy it without having to buy anything. I accidentally smashed mine when I tried to yank it from the apartment window to litter the street with David's script. I severely underestimated the job, and grossly overestimated my capabilities while absolutely blitzed off a bottle of Jim Beam's satanic cousin. The landlord's appliance insurance doesn't cover bouts of emotional distress and I'm not sure when my next paycheck is coming in. So I settle on spending my days sweltering in my own intoxication until I can stomach the thought of the hum of working evaporator coils at House of Kolbe.

I try not to make it a habit to come in while I'm not sober. Lifetimes have passed since I've stepped foot in a church with active faith, but Catholic guilt still keeps me in reconciliation formation like a flinch. As soon as I sink into the faded padded leather of a pew, the aura of my sins radiating through my perspiration, the words spill out faster than altar boys fall asleep during Easter Litany of the Saints: *Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.*

There's a phantom comfort in revisiting places of ritual. It's a reminder that things could always be worse, and even when they are – because they always will be – all can be forgiven with a few well-meaning routines.

An older priest comes in daily to refill the rusty-looking font of holy water, offer services, and make sure people aren't passed out in the pews. People like me.

As if on cue, the hardwood doors behind me open and close on themselves with a dampened thud. Keys jangle brightly as the priest shuffles through the pews in my peripheral. He straightens stacks of beat-up Bibles at the end of every row. Picks out trash from the pamphlet holders. Today there is another parishioner in the left assembly section, an elderly woman in the frontmost row. She's orthodox, silver hair peeking out from beneath a dark veil, working her way through a rosary. It's matte red like the relic I have from a pre-David relationship – a souvenir from my girlfriend's study stint in Rome. I kept them near the apartment door as a talisman, even after she left. David hated them. When he moved in, there was an unspoken agreement he would buy new sheets, and I would banish the beads to a dresser drawer.

Acts 16:25

My stomach twists at the unwanted memory.

There's the sound of shifting weight on wood behind me, a cough, and the ruffle of thin, cellulose sheets printed with promises of salvation and healing. Things I haven't believed in since before Monica.

"Will you be needing Confession today?" The priest's voice is gravel in a blender. Dry and sharp. I pick at a peeling cuticle, too embarrassed to look back at him, a flush crawling up my neck as I think about the last time I cared enough to seek out the sacrament. Back when David and I were first dating, before we moved in together and things were Good. We were navigating awkward post-date waters, gauging if sex was on the table. If it was, whose place to go to. I hadn't cleaned the apartment in days. I'd been editing a project when I stumbled on that rosary and went on a bender; the apartment was always first to fall in the line of Monica-inspired crossfire. The thought of bringing him over, this shiny and new and slightly arrogant creature that was the antithesis of everything I'd been running from, having him catch a glimpse of what he was getting into with me... I snapped.

I pressed against David, devouring. I didn't resist when his hands slid from my cheek to my hips as we kissed, igniting pop rocks across my skin. We fumbled into the backseat of his car. Colors bloomed as I buried my face in his shoulder, bit down into the sweater I didn't know I would set on fire six months later. One of his hands braced against the window for support – I heard the squeak of sweaty, sliding skin, and anchored myself in that sound. It kept me in the moment, kept me from getting swept away by stray thoughts of Monica. Her hands never squeaked or sweat or slid. They made me effervescent, like David's. They filled the same emptiness as David's. They made me feel beautiful and wanted and I thought his could, too.

The next morning, I was hollow. I didn't think twice about the bus money to go across town to St. Paul's. I just needed someone – anyone – to unload that darkness. But I'm better acquainted with that nightmare now.

"I'm good." My reply is curt as I swim back to the present. I pull the cuticle too far, wincing as I split into fresh skin. I stuff my hands under my thighs so I don't see the blood bead up. "It's just the usual stuff – coveting, lusting, lying..." I tap my foot, trying to think of other venial trivialities to put him off. "I'm probably going to lose my new writing gig."

He chuckles. "That's not a sin."

"No, but being too lazy to care about getting dropped from the project is one. Self-destructing instead of dealing with it is another."

Acts 16:25

The priest makes a noise of agreement, triggering another cough. “Everyone’s got their ways of tamping down their demons.”

I lean forward, resting my forehead on a knot in the wood of the backrest in front of me. “Mine aren’t exactly the kind that respond well to Hail Marys.” I swallow down the burning at the base of my throat.

His Bible snaps shut with a sharp thump. “I get the feeling you’re not entirely sold on the notion of reconciliation.”

Tenderness flares in my finger. “Forgive me, Father, if I’m skeptical on the idea of laying out secrets for a stranger to judge in exchange for negotiated grace.”

“I don’t judge,” he corrects, “that’s not my job. I just listen.”

“Listen to what?”

He sighs, but not exasperatedly. It’s something deeper. “Pain.” He drums against the backrest behind me, thinking. “Sometimes people need to expel it,” he continues, wood creaking in relief as he shifts. “Sometimes people need to share that burden more than they need forgiveness from it.

Indignation rises like reflux. “People like me?”

“People like you, people like mee... We’re all in the same boat, just trying to hold out the night storm until dawn.”

My anger fizzles in my lap, a familiar melty feeling snaking through my spine. My eyes start to drift shut. “She hates when I’m like this.”

It slips out before I register it never should have crossed my mind. Suddenly I’m back in the bed we picked out for the apartment. Tangled in sheets I bought because they were the same color as her eyes when she smiled. They smell like tangerines. Then sex that isn’t ours. Cheap strawberry gloss smeared across my cheek, my face pressed into a neck that isn’t hers. An empty bottle wedged between my breasts and a back I don’t recognize.

“*Hated*. She *hated* when I’m like this.”

The priest scratches his beard thoughtfully, the sandpaper sound going straight through my brain. “*She*,” he says, and I hear a sad smile. My stomach drops with the weight of his pity.

“And *him*,” I add for good measure.

We lapse into silence. The old woman moves her praying to the votive candles. The AC whirs to life, and I’m grateful for the metallic drone between us all.

“I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t broken it,” I muse. “The AC. I broke mine. Not on purpose.”

Acts 16:25

“What happened?”

“Fell into the street when I tried to throw stuff out the window.”

The priest laughs around a deep cough. “Hers?”

“His.” I grin, remembering the rain of loose leaf, fluttering down into the mess of glass and plastic and Freon like broken birds. It was after the sweater – that was still smoldering in the tub when he barreled into the apartment, sweaty from sprinting up the stairs. The sound of the doorknob going through the sidelight panel. The living room floor an ocean between us, covered in shattered dinnerware. His face crimson, screaming he’d kill me. It was the first time I laughed when he’d said it.

“What’d he do?”

“A lot of bad things. It wasn’t always like that, though.” I still feel sick adding that last bit.

He murmurs in knowing agreement. “Bad is relative. Just because one thing is worse than another doesn’t make the second thing any good. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 – *abstain from every form of evil.*”

I’m silent as I mull it over. It’s not that simple – it doesn’t consider the density between the evils. “I know.”

“What did she do?”

“Nothing.”

“‘Nothing’ doesn’t leave you wrecked enough that you settle for *him*,” he says gently.

“It’s the truth.” The fact is that if Monica had any faults, it’s that she was *too* perfect. Patient. Kind. All kinds of Good that I was not. I drank too much. Didn’t work hard enough. I brought someone else into our home. If I was going to be brutally transparent with myself, *that’s* why I stayed with David.

“I never knew when to stop,” I tell him, feeling so small. “I don’t think I can, even if I wanted to. She knew it.”

“Still, she loved you.”

“I was too much for her. For him, I could never be enough.”

“But you still loved them.”

My throat collapses on itself as the tears well up. I don’t trust myself to manage words, just sort of nod, and we soak in the aftermath of that revelation. It’s the first time I’m unboxing these feelings without drowning, without actively trying to escape my thoughts. I pass them over in my mind’s eye, hold each one up to the light and inspect them closer. All these kaleidoscope pieces, and I’m too afraid to see what picture they’ll form when they twist, shift, and finally settle.

Acts 16:25

I've always thought in terms of relative absolutes: where Monica was Good, I was Bad. Where David was Bad, I was Good. But because of what I'd done to her, I thought I deserved him. Deserved that pain to try and absolve myself of the guilt. It was a truth tattooed inside of me, a place I could never scrub clean. Even now, in House of Kolbe, it burns. Leaving David would have been an act of cowardice, refusing my penance. It wasn't enough to miss Monica – I had to hurt for her, too.

The woman is singing softly now with her candles and beads, snippets of a hymn I recognize: *Though like a wanderer, daylight all gone...*

The priest rises behind me, hands on my backrest to steady himself.

...Darkness be over me, my rest a stone...

“Would you like to pray with us?”

I remember lazy Sunday mornings wrapped up in Monica. Her crestfallen face in the bedroom doorway on the one morning I can never take back but wish again and again and again that I could. The first time David kissed me, and I didn't wish it was her. The evolution of the apartment – of my life – into an unrecognizable routine of violence. The acrid smell of burning yarn wafting out the empty, broken apartment window. His sweaty, incredulous tomato face. The shattered panel. The rosary beads hung up in one final act of spite. I remember it all in perfect sequence, crystalline in my mind's eye, aching in every direction.

I close my eyes from the effort of it all. The storm may have cleared and the sun may have risen, but I'm not ready to step out of the boat. “I'd just like to listen.”

Not yet.



ESSAYS

Faithless, I Plead With The Father For Grace

Katharine Blair

My mother turned her back on God at the age of five. She'd already passed on smoking the year before. Some things, she would say, you just know you don't want any part of. So it was one Sunday when a no-eyed boy was paraded by the other children in church as a lesson in God's grace. She decided that day that she'd seen just about enough of omnipotence in action. All that power and this is how he uses it. Five and already too savvy about the predilections of men.

Fathers the first men, fathers the last. Some stories are well known before they've even begun.

I met the true will of God before I had eyes to witness the absence of eyes. I met my god through the walls of my mother. Before I knew them, I knew she could sing and I knew he could yell. And throw out a hell of a blow. She sang, he hit and I was born angry. Neck deep in the ugly of ourselves, him and I. She sang to us through all of it until she finally couldn't, then she sang to herself and kicked his fists out. We carried on, me holding his violence like torchlight, her wrestling it quiet with song. We grew still without his percussion, learned safety could be found in the sharing of breath.

*E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.*

When I was little and there were already too many of us and too many of the boys next door, my parents bought a fifteen seat Ford Econoline van. Imagine it rust red and limping, car seats wedged between those who could buckle, overturned milkcrate in the middle up front. We drove clear across the country in that van, slept there so often we each claimed a seat. In that van, voices rose from row upon burgundy vinyl row; tiny and scratchy, tone deaf and strong. We passed the time singing standards and folkways, old country and bluegrass, whatever we knew.

Faithless, I Plead With The Father For Grace

We sang because the road was long, and the day was. We sang because mom did and because it made her smile when we all joined in. We sang because she birthed us and chose us and taught us the song. We sang because we'd each known the meaning of silence, of breath held. Quiet. Alone.

There's something about voices raised together, about the simplicity of hand in hand in hand we make each other strong. If you've been to a service, heard the rifling of scritta, seen men gathered on the steps on Thursday at dusk, then maybe you've had occasion to feel it too.

*Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
Darkness be over me, my rest a stone;*

Eleven years old, the morning after a sleepover, I'm wearing a dress in the church of a friend. A hundred people in Little Trinity and we make up four. I am my usual afraid to be somewhere new with so many someones new and I'm doing my best to 'fit in' and 'be respectful' but mostly what I want is to be graced with allowance to hide. But the Church Ladies. Door to pew have seen us rubbed raw with encouragement, fawned over, talked at, made too warm, and sat. It is a beautiful church. Quietly, compellingly, a pianist calls us to rise. And we do. Like the ocean to the moon. We rise and I know this one, no hymnal required.

*Then, with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise,
Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;*

We rise and I'm carried. Adrift on the water, paddles tucked under, hope held for the promise of a benevolent end.

So by my woes to be nearer, my God, to Thee.

I am faithless to this day, but greedily covet the comfort of grace. How appealing the idea that we suffer by need. How nice to think it could have been other than my father to puppet his hands. He was so fond of excuses, but mostly those that kept us alone. Trees and apples, fathers and daughters, I learned his excuses and I've used them all too. Still fumbling, still angry, now tired of alone too. I miss my mother, my sisters, that van, those miles, and my voice cradled whole.

Faithless, I Plead With The Father For Grace

*Or if on joyful wing, cleaving the sky,
Sun, moon, and stars forgot, upwards I fly,
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee,*

I still turn to music when things get too hard. I could tell you what I played the night I birthed my first child, and her siblings; what songs came to mind as I buried the three. I could tell you I ran down the drive the morning my mother died—that loping run, long strides you swear will end in flight—echo of her song bouncing back through the trees. I could tell you that when I broke my wrist so badly the surgeons got giddy, the caught voice of a friend got me through resetting the bones. And yet, these quiet moments—solo communions in times of great need—fall short for the loss of the voices now gone. When I kick now, no one leads me, I just have to stop. When my son kicks, I steel my voice to his feet and remember her words. Child as apple, parent as tree, parent as child apple—sun lit and watered, still rotten from seed.

*There in my Father's home, safe and at rest,
There in my Savior's love, perfectly blest*

Sometimes when I've been him too long--when we've both kicked, or just me--I'll pull the babe into my lap and sing. "When we've been here ten thousand years..." You can start anywhere with Amazing Grace and I do. Whichever the lesson I'm needing that day. I start and watch as they settle and join, each of us adding our verse to the last.

Something about the broken and tired bringing themselves to the whole. My children on the floor, my sisters in the van, the whole of Crockett Island stood out on that beach. All the time, the singing. All the time the mother, beaten, defeated, and trying her best. All the time the children, eyes set on the Gods of their making, dawn coming to shed light on all of their flaws. The mother, the child, and the music that binds them. The father, his father, and the fire he's brought down.

All the time the singing.
All the time the failure, the faulty, the flawed.
All the time, the want, the need, for longing for more.
All the time the singing and a pleading for grace.

Faithless, I Plead With The Father For Grace

When it's over, take a boat out and prove us all wrong.

When it's over, find the water, find my mother and my son.

When it's over, find me singing.

When it's over comes the dawn.

Age after age to be nearer, my God, to Thee.

“As God Wanted You:” Desire, Devotion, and Disability in *Midnight Mass*

Raye Hendrix

There are many ways in which *Midnight Mass*, the newest horror installment from creator Mike Flanagan, is a triumph. In addition to offering thoughtful criticisms and explorations of faith, fate, religious trauma, and free will, the series takes the legend of the vampire and gives it new life (pun intended). The vampire(s) in *MM* still burn in the sun, prefer the darkness, and have an insatiable bloodthirst, but rather than being repelled by Christian iconography, is it Christianity that allows it to thrive and take hold of the residents of Crockett Island. The vampire, after being mistaken by the island’s aging Monsignor Pruitt for an angel, becomes an agent of healing, clothed in the trappings of Christianity. The series has received wide acclaim, garnering no shortage of rave reviews, and has generally been considered a massive success. I admit to finding the series enjoyable and compelling myself—for the most part. There are moments where *MM* lacks nuance—the blatantly hypocritical zealotry and the pseudo-intellectual monologues Flanagan is known for, for example—but the biggest failure of *MM* is its predictable and disappointing treatment of disability, particularly in the character of Leeza Scarborough, a young woman who becomes a wheelchair user after a spinal injury. I analyze *MM*’s treatment of disability with respect to two major themes within the show: devotion and desire.

Disability and Devotion

Through dialogue and visual cues, we learn that Leeza is one of the very few extremely devout Catholics on Crockett Island. In multiple episodes, but especially the first two, the camera routinely pans the meager, three- or four-person strong Mass audience in the one church on the island, and Leeza is always present, always takes communion, and always appears raptly engaged by the sermon, her hands frequently folded and eyes glistening with pious tears. In the second episode of *MM*, or “Book II: Psalms,” the young, new to Crockett Island Father Paul Hill (who is, we learn later, the elderly Msgr. Pruitt made young again by the vampire’s blood) is walking down a road alongside Leeza, when she asks him what brought him to the Island. Instead of simply repeating what he revealed to the residents in the first

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episode—that he came to temporarily replace Msgr. Pruitt while the elderly priest was hospitalized on the mainland—Father Hill turns his answer into a lesson. He recites a platitude about the nature of the journey: where we’ve been isn’t as important as where we’re going. “Every place I was before where I am now,” he tells Leeza, “well, they were just leading me here. Even if I didn’t know it at the time. Even if I didn’t see it. It’s kind of like you.” Leeza responds with a bewildered smile that she’s lived on the island her whole life, to which Father Hill answers, “Sure, but there was a before for you too. It was pointing you here, and you know what that thing is, that’s pointing us where we’re going, whether we know it or not? It’s God. He was pointing you here” (“Book II,” 10:34-10:58). Leeza’s disability status, Father Hill suggests, is God’s own will; she was disabled for holy purposes.

The idea that disability is tied to divinity or purity is nothing new. Disability scholars have long pointed to innocent, sympathetic characters like Charles Dickens’ Tiny Tim as pure-hearted misfits meant to make able-bodied people better: if someone *like that* can be kind, happy, and content with their lot in life, surely non-disabled people have no excuse for bad behavior. In her essay, “The Politics of Staring,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes this phenomenon of simultaneously patronizing and elevating Leeza in two of four “visual rhetorics” she proposes: the wondrous and the sentimental. The figures of “wondrous” disabled individuals, she writes, were those who “inspired awe...or bore divine signs,” and were viewed in such a way that the viewing “gives meaning to impairment” (59-60). But while Father Hill imbues Leeza’s disability status with religious meaning, she is also reduced to that Tiny Tim figure of piety and purity. “Sentimentality has inflected the wonder model,” Garland-Thomson writes, but “...whereas the wondrous elevates and enlarges, the sentimental diminishes” (61, 63). The sentimentality model produces the disabled person as “the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity [and] inspiration” (63). In addition to Father Hill ascribing divine wonder and purpose to Leeza’s disability, she is also consistently infantilized. In the same episode, Father Hill refers to Leeza as “Little Leeza” when discussing the accident that caused her paralysis (“Book II,” 32:14). And towards the end of the episode, we get confirmation of what the show’s visual cues have been suggesting all along: Leeza is a lesson in piety and devotion. Once more at Mass, Father Hill stares thoughtfully at Leeza in her wheelchair, the camera panning back and forth between their faces. When the time

1: I am thinking here, predominantly, of Leonard Kriegel, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work.

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comes for communion, Father Hill approaches Leeza first to offer the sacrament. When she lifts her hands to accept the wafer, Father Hill retreats backwards. Leeza moves her wheelchair forward, and Father Hill backs away further and up the steps of the dais, saying, “No. No. Come on” (58:38). The attendees verbally express their anger at Father Hill, but he continues pressing Leeza until finally, in an act of devotion and faith, Leeza gazes at Father Hill and tearfully rises to her feet, walks slowly up the steps and says, “Amen” (59:03-53).

Disability and Desire

Leeza at first seems a triumph for on-screen depictions of diversity as a young, disabled woman of color, and the positive portrayal remains at least partially true: Leeza is never the recipient of overt racism—that prejudice is predictably reserved for the Muslim Sherrif Hassan and his son, Ali. But prior to her “miraculous” rising from her wheelchair, our first interactions with and conversations about Leeza are those of exclusion and lack. When we first meet Leeza in the first few minutes of episode one, titled, “Book I: Genesis,” she is on her porch reading a book when a group of young men around her age ride by on bicycles, heading to a place called the “Uppards.” One of them, Warren Flynn, stops to tell her, “I wish you could come with us,” implying that where they’re going is not wheelchair accessible (“Book 1,” 9:06). Though this moment seems innocuous, minutes later, after the boys have reached the Uppards, as they sit around a campfire, one of the boys (Ooker) tells another (Ali) that Warren is “pining after roller-girl” and, after a disparaging look from Warren, adds, “Hey, no disrespect. It sucks being stuck in that chair” (“Book 1,” 12:38-43). This is the first instance, though it is far from the last, of disability being considered undesirable, even—or perhaps especially—when located within Warren’s crush on Leeza. As Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow note in the introduction to their anthology, *Sex and Disability*, in the popular social imagination, “able-bodiedness is the foundation of sexiness,” and “rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire” (1). That Warren is pining after someone who’s “stuck in” a wheelchair “sucks,” the implication being that it’s at least partially the fact that Leeza uses a wheelchair that keeps them from being together; her being “stuck” becomes synonymous with the relationship’s failure to launch.

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More than romantic desire, though, in *MM* there is an overarching and blatant desire not only to not be disabled, but to eradicate disability. In fact, underneath the horror narrative, the show’s entire premise hinges on the desire to be healed: in the fourth episode of *Midnight Mass*, “Book IV: Lamentations,” by way of Father Hill referring to the vampire’s (angel’s) blood as “the sacrament,” we learn that he has been dosing the communion wine in order to harness the vampire’s healing properties for the faithful of Crockett Island (1:04:06). Disability is characterized as and conceived of exclusively as suffering multiple times by multiple characters. One example occurs in episode two as Riley Flynn, a recovering alcoholic, rants to Father Hill about the nature of God and suffering. Riley, unable to reconcile, mentions Joe Collie, who is responsible for firing the gunshot that disabled Leeza, “Not a single good thing comes out of Leeza never being able to walk again,” and refers to the idea that “suffering can be a gift from God” as the reason believers can let themselves “off the hook” for the pain they cause others (“Book II,” 50:02-17). Later, at the start of the third episode (“Book III: Proverbs”) at Leeza’s first medical appointment post-“miracle,” the doctor expresses her desire to get Leeza to the mainland for advanced testing, telling Leeza’s parents, “The more we know about what’s happened, the more we can help other people suffering,” and tells Leeza, “You are standing, you are walking, that’s the most important thing. I’m very happy for you” (“Book III,” 5:56-6:45). Leeza’s parents are skeptical of testing, however, saying it “feels wrong” to “second-guess a gift from God” (7:24-7:28), the implication being that, if able-bodiedness is a gift, then disability is necessarily a punishment or curse. Finally, in episode 4, Bev Keene—a devoutly pious, nun-like member of the church—tells Leeza’s father when he expresses doubt about God’s will, “If you want to pick and choose which one of [God’s] works are palatable to you, return all His graces to sender, then, and let your little girl sit back down in that wheelchair” (“Book IV,” 53:10-23). If ability is proof of God’s grace, then disability must be evidence of his wrath.

In a reinforcement of this narrative, later in the episode, Leeza goes to confront Joe Collie. She tells Joe she “hates him,” that she wants him to “hurt” and “suffer,” that she wants him “to beg for [her] forgiveness so that [she] can tell him no,” and that she wants him “to live in complete, absolute misery,” signifying that, for Leeza, her disability caused her to hurt and suffer, to live in misery (29:36-30:08). Leeza also tells Joe that he “stole” from her, saying he “reached through time” and took from Leeza “not just who [she] was, but who [she] could’ve been” (30:21-30). The

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notion that there is no desirable future for people with disabilities is at best unoriginal and unimaginative, and at worst, harmful. It plays into an incapability to imagine what Alison Kafer in *Feminist Queer Crip* calls “crip futurity” or “crip futures,” and relies upon the “assumption that disability cannot be a desirable location, and that it must always be accompanied by a nostalgia for the lost able mind/body” (Kafer 43). Finally, to reinforce the idea that disability is suffering and to return to disability’s place in romantic desire, in the same episode, shortly before her confrontation with Joe, we see Leeza sneaking out at night to climb up and tap on Warren’s window. She beckons him outside by smiling and spinning gleefully, and Warren finally takes Leeza out to the Uppards, where, now that she’s non-disabled, they share a kiss (15:05-16:24). By this metric, the place of disability in romantic desire is a non-place; Leeza, no longer “stuck” in her wheelchair, no longer suffering, becomes a viable object of Warren’s desire, and allows their romance to at last be fully-realized.

As God Wanted You

In the fifth episode, while talking with a newly-undead Riley, Father Hill reveals himself to be the de-aged Msgr. Pruitt, as well as his reasons for dosing the community with vampire blood: “You’ve been...taken back to your best self. Your peak self, your perfect self, as God wanted you” (“Book V,” 29:40-47). Father Hill repeats this sentiment in the penultimate episode at the midnight Easter Mass, again revealing himself as Msgr. Pruitt to the crowd and saying, “[I have been] made well, made whole, made young, the same as you...I was restored, as you have all been restored” (“Book VI,” 45:01-46:59). If the vampire’s blood returns one to their “perfect self,” the self as God intended them, then the only conclusion we can draw is that Leeza’s disabled body was imperfect and not as God desired; that she was not “well,” was not “whole,” that she was in need of restoration. Leeza’s body was far from the only one “healed” by the vampire’s blood—Riley’s father’s aching back, his mother’s failing eyesight, the doctor’s mother with dementia and old bones—but her “miracle” is the most egregious example of *MM*’s failing to positively represent disability. Like so many narratives before it, *MM* relies on what McRuer terms in *Crip Theory* “compulsory able-bodiedness,” or the assumption “that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all,

2: While I have no desire or intent to police the experiences and emotions of real disabled individuals, I feel that given that neither the actor playing Leeza Scarborough nor the creator/director Mike Flanagan are wheelchair users nor have mobility-based disabilities, this assessment of the narrative move is fair.

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collectively, are aiming for” (9). It is disabled Leeza’s devotion, her regular attendance of Mass and partaking of communion, that “rewards” her with being “healed” of her disability. In the end, it is only when Leeza outright refuses that devotion by not drinking the poison Father Hill hands out at Easter Mass to the congregation, and as the sun rises and the vampire blood is burned out of her body, because she abandoned her faith, she is made re-disabled. The show’s conclusion would have us believe that Leeza’s choice was disability over ability, when in reality, her choice was life over death. When fleeing the vampire and the burning island, Leeza had no reason to believe her disability would return—she was simply trying to survive. The final episode ends with Leeza telling Warren, “I can’t feel my legs,” and smiling, but this is not the revolutionary take on disability the *Midnight Mass* creators would have us believe it is (“Book VII,” 1:00:08). While, on the surface, this ending might appear to be a reification or reclaiming of disability, since we learn that Leeza’s abled body was the result of evil, so while her disabled body is not desirable, it is morally “good,” and falls right back into traps of wonder and sentimentality. Yes, in the end, Leeza is alive, but the “price” she pays for rejecting devotion is a return to disability.

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- McRuer, Robert and Anna Mollow, “Introduction,” *Sex and Disability*, Duke University Press, 2012, p. 1.
- Midnight Mass*, Created by Mike Flanagan, Netflix, 2021.



Content Warning/Trigger Warning

Father Paul, I...

mentions of crucifixion and blood

girls aren't meant to be clipped

misogyny, sexism, suggestion of violence

drift

death, suggestion of violence, trauma

sunrise

blood, death

the cure to mortality

death

The Book of Revelation: The Covenant of the Angel

blood

survivors' prayer of divine forgiveness

some violence, revenge

of martyrs and monsters

some violence, revenge

men beholding monsters

some violence, revenge

the exorcism of nat raum

body horror and drowning and implies death and abuse

A HYMN FOR AFTER HOURS IN THE CHURCH PARKING LOT

sexual situations/sexual abuse, religious trauma, and dissociation

HAUNTOLOGY AS THE DISGUISE OF VAMPIRISM OR RELIGION

mention of alcohol

Content Warnings/Trigger Warnings

Decretum

mention of dead animals, description of blood

Simbang Gabi para sa mga Puti

mention of death, family member passing, death of a grandfather, curse words, strong language, use of the word 'fuck'

Only an (Aguila) Labra Would Fight God, Which is to Say Only I Would Fight God

mention of death, family member passing, death of a grandfather, curse words, strong language, use of the word 'fuck'

after communion, i question god

blood

Until Sunrise

suicide

cat food

dead bodies

Portrait of Love on Fire

mentions of human sacrifice and gore

Hold Me Holy

blood, sin, self-hate, oblique eroticism

The Priest and The Wife

pregnancy

The End of a Small Thing

animal death

Holy Dirt

blood, imprisonment, catholicism

Content Warnings/Trigger Warnings

Madness & Guilt

mentioned child death as well as drowning

I WANT YOU TO BITE ME

injury detail, gore

death of a heavenly host

*mentions of death to animals and humans, gun mention, spiritual abuse mention,
therapy tools mention, blood*

Acts 16:25

*discussion of drugs/alcohol, sex, Catholicism/church, abusive relationships,
infidelity, self-destructive thoughts/actions*

Text Versions of Artwork

Front Cover

a purple bar on the top and bottom of the cover mimic the black space of a widescreen movie. between the purple bars, there is a red-toned image of two pale hands holding a white leather-bound book at an angle. the cover of the leather book is stamped with a red metallic upside-down cross and red metallic dripping serif text reading “midnight mass” in all caps. the background behind the hands is an angled old-school tv screen with lines and static. in the bottom right-hand corner, there is a small white triangular play button and pixelated text reading “anthology” in all capitals.

Only The Righteous / page 23

In the foreground there is a statue of an angel, standing with their wings slightly flexed, reaching towards something we can't see. In the background are flames, in turns covered and revealed by the repeating twisting words, 'ONLY THE RIGHTEOUS'. The angel statue is slightly transparent, so the words are visible throughout, and layered onto the wings are the following words:

An angel came to me one evening as the sun went down. It told me not to be afraid, because it wouldn't ask more of me than I was able to give. I asked what I could possibly have that an angel would want, and it said, everything. My heart thumped louder than it ever had before, as if it knew this was its final performance. My lungs worked harder, sucking in oxygen as if they finally understood how precious it was. My skin tingled as a thousand nerve endings fired, blaring an alarm that I should be afraid, I should be. The angel approached with a kind smile, hungry. I took a step away and felt so ashamed when the angel frowned. It asked me what was wrong, but I stepped away again. It asked me if I wanted to live forever. It asked me if I wanted to be young again. I thought about the crow's feet around my eyes. I thought about the grey blooming in my hair. I thought about being young, swimming in the cold water just off the beach, scaring the fish with my toes. No, I didn't want that. No. No.

No, I told it. I don't want to live forever. I want to live my life and then go to heaven. It asked me what I thought was waiting for me in heaven, and I told it, forgiveness. It didn't look convinced.

Text Versions of Artwork

take me to church / page 36

A surreal piece of art using digital manipulation tools. There is a green grassy hill with a blue sky above, white fluffy clouds above. On the hill is an enormous fish, as big as a small house (or church). The fish is dead, mouth gaping open to reveal pointed fangs. Though it is dead, it appears malevolent due to the way the eyes are lit, like the mouth could close at any moment. Stepping into that mouth with one curious paw is a kitten. It is looking inside the mouth as if getting ready to go inside. There are two more young cats in the foreground, approaching the fish cautiously, perhaps waiting to see what happens to the kitten before they go inside as well.

Revel / page 55

‘Revel’ is an erasure poem from The Holy Bible, Book of Revelation 6:5 – 7:4. There is an image of a sunrise over rippling water, but the sunrise could easily be mistaken for fire. The selected words from the page show clearly through the image to form the poem, with shining lines connecting them to form phrases. In places, other words can be glimpsed through the clouds and water as if the top layer of reality is fading in places. The poem reads as follows (punctuation added for readability):

Revel – hear the creature, hold his hand. Do not damage the voice of Death. The wild souls of those slain call out. Blood was given. Wait, kill; be complete.

Open the sun, turn the stars, shake the sky. Remove every man. Call us, and face wrath.

Hold the wind. Call out in power. Put a seal on God.

Text Versions of Artwork

Revel / page 55

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Hold the wind. Call out in power. Put a seal on God.

Meet me in the infinite / page 96

In the background; a swirling galaxy, glowing at the centre, with stars spiralling out into the darkness of space. In the foreground, a nebula, visible only through the letters of the words that make up the piece. The feeling is as if looking through a long tunnel made of words that are fading away towards the brilliant point of light at the centre. The words say:

Meet me in the infinite.

I'll be the one wearing a galaxy on my wrist and last Tuesday in my eyes.

Meet me there to wonder at the silly things I said, like the time I said I hated you.

How marvellous a thing, to make these sounds that cut and wound.

All the more amazing for them not being true at all.

Meet me there and I'll explain how love and hate create the stars.

Text Versions of Artwork

shoal / page 103

A surreal piece of art using digital manipulation tools. It is an underwater scene, the water is a clear and pleasant blue. On first glance it seems we are looking at a shoal of exotic fish, but then we realize they are not fish, but wings – wings that could be from doves, or angels. They are in varying sizes and colours of cream, white and grey, apparently swimming slowly together as fish do. Above we can see the surface of the water, with two black fishing nets beginning to descend on the oblivious wings/fish below. Sunlight shines between the nets and waves to illuminate the wings beneath.

Back Cover

Like the front cover, there is "a purple bar on the top and bottom of the cover mimic the black space of a widescreen movie. Between the purple bars," there is an image of a room inside of a church. The marble-stoned nativity scene sits underneath a Victorian Gothic archway. Above it, there are two candle holders with lit candles. Below, there are three chairs that sit right in the bottom-middle of the image. To the right side of those chairs, there is a wide staircase. The coloring of this image is red with a purplish tint.

On top of this image is a list of the writers in the anthology, each name separated by a cross, like this:

john compton † Tyler Norton † Bethany Walker † Lauren Theresa †
Alyson Tait † K.N. McDougall † Nicole Tallman † Halle Preneta †

Kevin

Woodley † Keana Aguila Labra † Alessandra Nysether-Santos † Raye
Hendrix † Ariel K. Moniz † nat raum † Kiri DeLandé † The Rt. Hon.
Nathan Dennis † Vera Hadzic † Katharine Blair † lukas ray hall † AJ
Pfeffer † Arden Hunter † Taylor Brunson † Gabrielle Roessler †
Katherine J Zumpano † Sofía Aguilar † Grace Varley & Alexandra Ricou
† B.A. O'Connell † Dr. Bunny McFadden † L.C. Star † Dana Knott †
Rachael Crosbie † Charlie D'Aniello

Contributor Biographies

Nicole Tallman (she/her) was born and raised in Michigan and serves as the Poetry Ambassador for Miami-Dade County, Associate Editor for South Florida Poetry Journal and Interviews Editor for The Blue Mountain Review. Her debut chapbook, "Something Kindred," is forthcoming from The Southern Collective Experience (SCE) Press. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @natallman and at nicoletallman.com.

Sofia Aguilar is a Latina writer and editor originally from Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in Latina Media, Melanin. Magazine, and The Westchester Review, among other publications. As a first-generation college graduate, she earned a BA from Sarah Lawrence College, where she received the Andrea Klein Willison Prize for Poetry and the Spencer Barnett Memorial Prize for Excellence in Latin American and Latinx Studies. You can find her at sofiaaguilar.com.

(B.A. O'Connell) When a pivotal moment in B.A.'s youth caused them to turn to poetry with serious intent, they were changed. Today, they often pen four to eight poems a day. B.A.'s poetry and blog focuses on poems and art centring around trauma, recovery, and mental health. B.A. also touches on themes of abusive, obsessive, and unhealthy relationships and the pain of moving on from them.

Dana Knott's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in The American Journal of Poetry, Bitter Oleander, Emrys Journal, Parhelion, Ethel Zine, FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art, and Rejection Letters. Currently, she works as an academic library director in Ohio.

Charlie D'Aniello (he/they) is an author, editor, and incorrigible nerd. He often dreams of surreal apocalypses, cathartic arguments, and of writing positive fictional queer representation. He is the editor-in-chief of warning lines magazine and managing editor of the winnow, and has been published in places such as journal of erato, HOLYFLEA!, Wrongdoing Magazine, the NoSleep Podcast, among others. He lives in Sweden with his cats, Jack and Earnest.

Contributor Biographies

john compton (b. 1987) is gay poet who lives in kentucky. his poetry resides in his chest like many hearts & they bloom like vigorously infectious wild flowers. he lives in a tiny town, with his husband josh and their 3 dogs and 2 cats. he feels his head is an auditorium filled with the dead poets from the past. poems are written and edited constantly. his poetry is a personal journey. he reaches for things close and far, trying to give them life: growing up gay; having mental health issues; a journey into his childhood; the world that surrounds us. he writes to be alive, to learn and to grow. he loves imagery, metaphor, simile, abstract language, sounds, when one word can drift you into another direction. he loves playing with vocabulary, creating texture and emotions. he has published 1 book and 5 chapbooks published and forthcoming: *trainride elsewhere* (august 2016) from Pressed Wafer; *that moan like a saxophone* (december 2016) from kindle; *ampersand* (march 2018) from Plan B Press; *a child growing wild inside the mothering womb* (june 2020) from ghost city press; *i saw god cooking children / paint their bones* (oct 2020) from blood pudding press; *to wash all the pretty things off my skin* (sept 2021) from ethel zine & micro-press. he has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies.

Ariel K. Moniz (she/her) is a queer Black poetess and Hawaii local currently living abroad. Her poems have found homes with Blood Bath Literary Zine, Black Cat Magazine, and Sunday Mornings at the River Press, among others. She is the winner of the 2016 Droste Poetry Award and a Best of the Net nominee. You can find her on her website at kissoftheseventhstar.home.blog, on Twitter @kissthe7thstar, on Instagram @kiss.of.the.seventh.star, or staring out to sea.

Alessandra Nysether-Santos (she/hers) is a Brazilian American writer and high school English teacher in North Carolina. Catholic aesthetics both haunt and delight her. She has poetry forthcoming with *Até Mais: an Anthology of Latinx Futurisms* and *lickety-split*. Commune with her on Twitter @donotdiscover and IG @hashtagalessandra

Contributor Biographies

Arden Hunter is a neurodivergent aroace agender writer, artist and performer. With an eclectic range of interests from the horrific to the whimsical, the theme tying all of their work together is an inexplicable and unconditional love of the ridiculous beast that is called 'human'. Arden has words and art hosted and upcoming with Cinnabar Moth Publishing, Acid Bath Publishing and Kissing Dynamite among other places. Find them on Twitter @hunterarden and at ardenhunter.com.

nat raum (b. 1996) is a queer disabled multimedia artist and writer currently working towards their mfa at the university of baltimore. their work is based primarily on their lived experience with c-ptsd, chronic illness, and queerness, and often takes the form of image/text publications. nat is also the founder and editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press, a queer lit & art publishing space. nat is an avid fan of glass animals, noise-cancelling headphones, indica-dominant hybrids, and bisexual lighting, preferably all at once.

Rachael Crosbie (they/them) has two chapbooks with ELJ Editions, Ltd.: *swerve* and *MIXTAPES*. A poem in *MIXTAPES*, "Lipstick & Fish", was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. They self-published a chapbook, self-portrait of poems about bad poetry, in October. Their next work of poetry, *Trick Mirror or Your Computer Screen*, is forthcoming with fifth wheel press. You can find them on Twitter @rachaelapoet posting about She-Ra and The Princesses of Power, squishmallows, and cats.

Vera Hadzic is a writer from Ottawa, studying history and English literature at the University of Ottawa. Her work has appeared in *Hexagon Magazine*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Okay Donkey*, and elsewhere. She can be found on Twitter @HadzicVera

Keana Aguila Labra is a Cebuana Tagalog Filipinx poet who loves banana ketchup with her french fries. Send your flowered memories to her magazine, *Marias* at *Sampaguitas* (and an orange milk tea, too.) The continuing theme of her writing is family history and the self, which is to say she is still in love with the moon. She is the honorary Santa Clara County Poet Laureate for Oct. '21.

Contributor Biographies

Katherine J Zumpano is a Pisces and poet in the Pacific Northwest. She's co-EIC of Dollar Store Magazine and has been published in Southchild Lit, Jeopardy Magazine, and more. She lives with her partner and too-many houseplants.

Kiri DeLandé is a Black, queer poet who lives in New England. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her baking bread, brewing tea, or admiring the moon. Her most recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Ink Drinkers Magazine, The Elpis Pages: A Collective and Moss Puppy Magazine. You can find her on Twitter @kismetmoon_.

lukas ray hall is a queer non-binary poet. they are the author of *loudest when startled* (YesYes Books, 2020). their poems have appeared in The Florida Review, Moon City Review, Atlanta Review & Raleigh Review, among others. they live in St. Paul, MN.

Halle Preneta (she/her) enjoys writing short romance, sci-fi, and horror stories along with poetry and gets her ideas from random life experiences and fanfiction. When she's not writing, she's either watching YouTube or playing Animal Crossing. Her Twitter handle is @YaTheatreNerd and you can check out more of her work here: <https://sites.google.com/view/halle-preneta/home>

Lauren Theresa (she/her) is a writer, botanical sorceress, and depth psychotherapist living outside NYC with her two daughters, husband, and myriad of plants. Her musings can be found via IG & Twitter @imlaurentheresa, and her words crawl the pages of laurentheresa.com.

Taylor Brunson is a poet living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Her work has recently been featured in *Moist Poetry Journal*, *perhappened*, and *warning lines mag*. She serves as an assistant poetry editor for *Four Way Review* and an assistant nonfiction editor for *Nashville Review*. Taylor can be found on Twitter, @taylor_thefox.

Contributor Biographies

Nathan Dennis is a Brooklyn based playwright and poet of Floridian extraction. He serves as the Vintner-in-Chief of Wine Cellar Press, a poetry press dedicated to free and formal verse in equal measure. His debut chapbook, *I am Hades*, is available through Exeter Publishing.

AJ Pfeffer (he/him) is a young trans & Jewish writer who spends an inordinate amount of time exploring churches around the world. His other work can be found in *Ink Drinkers*, *warning lines* magazine, & *Ice Lolly Review*; you can track him down on Twitter @Pfeffington.

Grace Varley an author from Kent with a BA and MA in Creative and Professional Writing from the University of East London, primarily writing Middle Grade and Adult Fantasy novels and short stories.

Alexandra Ricou is a Somerset-based actor, drag king writer and reviewer, who has had her work published online and has performed personal monologues to audiences across the country.

Bethany Walker is a licensed social worker and trauma therapist. She currently resides in Longview, TX with her husband, daughter, and pets. In her free time, she binges horror movies, collects an absurd amount of books, and writes fiction in various forms. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Timber Ghost Press*, and more. Find her on Twitter @bookshelfofbeth.

Alyson Tait lives in Maryland where she got married, had her daughter, and began her writing journey. She has appeared in (mac)ro(mic), *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *Twin Pies Lit*, and *Pyre Magazine*. You can find her on Amazon, and Twitter @rudexvirus1. Her website is AlysonTait.com

Dr. Bunny McFadden (she/they) is a Chicana mother who tinkers with words for a living. In addition to being the winner of the 2021 Golden Ox and being published in horror & scifi anthologies, they've written widely in academia & hosted workshops on storytelling with UNICEF and the Royal Centre School. Their website is DocBunny.com.

Contributor Biographies

L.C. Star is a Mexican-Salvadorian American writer who grew up in Killeen, Texas with her military family but eventually settled in Arizona for college. Currently, she's in New Jersey with her boyfriend – dreaming about fantasy, romance, anime, video games, and horror.

Kevin Woodley is writer and editor living in Cornwall and the co-founder of Seaborne Magazine: a digital lit mag all about the sea with the aim of supporting marine charities. He lives with his partner and their silly cat, Sailor.

Tyler Norton is a horror writer from Upstate New York. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *The Arcanist*, *The Final Girl Bulletin Board*, and *Ghost Orchid Press's Home* anthology.

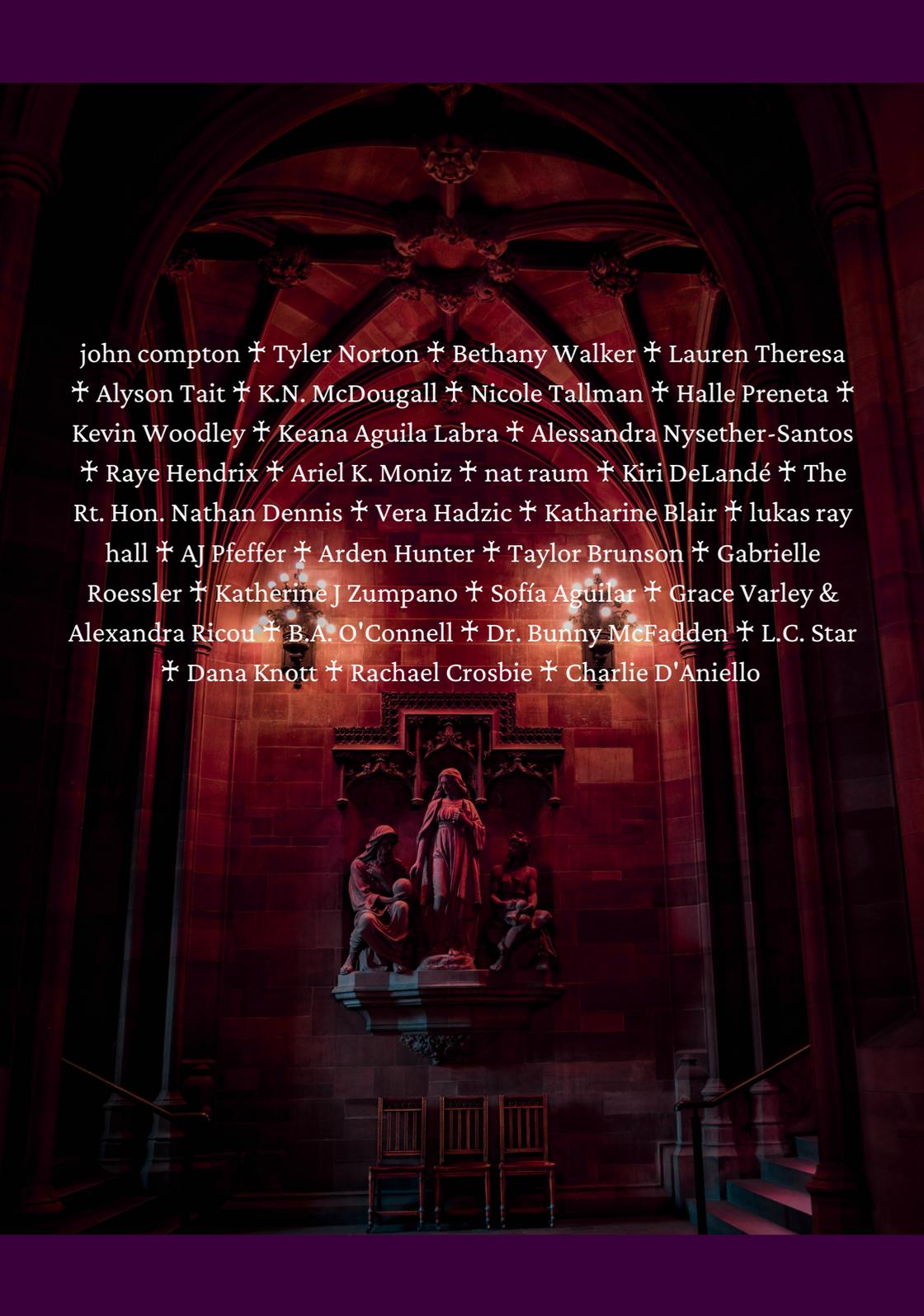
K.N. McDougall is a 23 year old Colorado based writer and occasional poet. They can be found pitching story ideas to the rocks and the cryptids on hikes.

Gabrielle Roessler is a creative sprinter - she writes short stories, poetry, and creative nonfiction that prove she made great returns on her therapy investments. Her work has been featured in *Storyteller*, *Orange Blush Zine*, *Warning Lines*, *Headcannon Magazine*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, and elsewhere. She is inspired by myth, magical girls, a healthy fear of space, and overheard conversations that never happened.

writer • poet • mother • tired • hungry • scared

Katharine Blair is co-eic of *Corporeal* and en*gendered. Occasionally she finds time to write.

Raye Hendrix is an award-winning writer from Birmingham, Alabama. She is the author of the chapbooks "*Every Journal is a Plague Journal*" (Bottlecap Press) and "*Fire Sermons*" (Ghost City Press), and the Poetry Editor of *Press Pause Press*. Raye's work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *32 Poems*, *Cimarron Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. Raye is a unionized PhD student at the University of Oregon studying poetry, Deafness, and disability.



john compton † Tyler Norton † Bethany Walker † Lauren Theresa
† Alyson Tait † K.N. McDougall † Nicole Tallman † Halle Preneta †
Kevin Woodley † Keana Aguila Labra † Alessandra Nysether-Santos
† Raye Hendrix † Ariel K. Moniz † nat raum † Kiri DeLandé † The
Rt. Hon. Nathan Dennis † Vera Hadzic † Katharine Blair † lukas ray
hall † AJ Pfeffer † Arden Hunter † Taylor Brunson † Gabrielle
Roessler † Katherine J Zumpano † Sofía Aguilar † Grace Varley &
Alexandra Ricou † B.A. O'Connell † Dr. Bunny McFadden † L.C. Star
† Dana Knott † Rachael Crosbie † Charlie D'Aniello