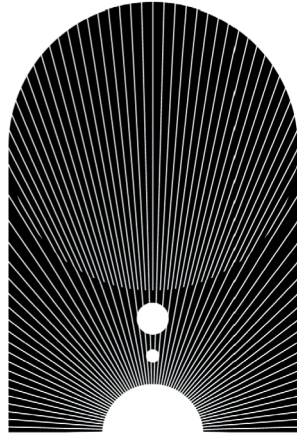




SOLUM JOURNAL
FALL 2022



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FALL 2022

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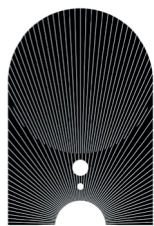
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CALL TO PRAYER

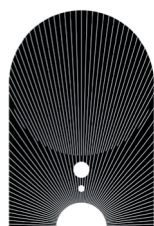
JOSHUA GAGE

The Call

Last night, I dreamt
God falling
as maple leaves.
I awoke to find
my porch dyed
red with Autumn.

A cold wind crawls
down from the mountain
to wail my porch clean.
Do not let the wind
mourn here. Tonight,
I sleep with my window
open, my door unlocked.

Joshua Gage is an ornery curmudgeon from Cleveland. His newest chapbook, *blips on a screen*, is available on Cuttlefish Books. He is a graduate of the Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing at Naropa University. He has a penchant for Pendleton shirts, Ethiopian coffee, and any poem strong enough to yank the breath out of his lungs. IG: @pottygok



POETRY

MATTER GERNENTZ

Nightfall

The heron sups on stillness,
gobbling the sum of it, starved,
'til the tide washes over its rock
and it bends, beak tilted open,
a strength rooted in waiting.
Aglow, I wonder at the lights
of a distant ship as we form
some sacred geometry: ship, bird,
and watching girl. How can I
begin to describe this light? Not
fireflies, pearls, or pinball machine—
allusion and illumination existing
out of reach, known only by divinity,
weaver of webs and fundamentals.
The observer leans against lichen stone,
oblivious to mist and cloaked in evening,
hurrying past new wreaths upon
the war grave. Chilled to the bone, restless
and barren, I walk in the middle of the road.

Pilgrim

Palms pressed, swept
up in sea breezes
and silent epiphanies,
this revelation born of
whispered breath and
surging tide, roaring near
while I could not gather
fickle courage to jump,
a rippled boulder slick
beneath shifting feet.

Cockle, spoon clam,
rayed artemis, limpet
clutched tightly, stowed
in skeletal harvest.

The boy among ruins
skipping stones, one,
two, that hover glibly,
suspended in delight,
before sinking still.

I pray that he will not
watch me fall and leap.

Mattea Gernentz is a poet and art curator from Tennessee based in Edinburgh, Scotland. With studies in art history, literature, and psychology, she is an alumna of St Andrews and Wheaton College. Selected as one of Scotland's 2022 Next Generation Young Makars, her writing meditates on themes of beauty, memory, and faith. Her work has been featured in Kodon, The Pub, ST.ART Magazine, and various anthologies.

JESSE KEITH BUTLER

Villanelle For The Elect

So Jacob was loved, and Esau was hated.
It seems like a bit of an uneven deal.
You won't stop creating this world you've created.

If Esau had hope it was quickly deflated.
The subtle supplanter had him by the heel.
But Jacob was loved, and Esau was hated.

Outside of the city, with heaven ungated
and rungs reaching down, Jacob glimpsed what was real—
you still were creating this world you'd created.

Poor Esau found Jacob's thin soup overrated
when robbed of his birthright for one meatless meal.
Yet Jacob was loved, and Esau was hated.

You grappled with Jacob. He grunted and grated
while you danced, delighted to meet with such zeal
as you kept creating this world you'd created.

There's purpose in life but the path isn't fated.
You unspool these urgings we don't even feel.
And Jacob was loved. And Esau was hated.
You keep on creating this world you've created.

Jesse Keith Butler lives with his wife and two children in Ottawa, Ontario. His poetry has been published in *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Better than Starbucks*, *Cloud Lake Literary*, and *Darkly Bright Press*. His lifelong exploration of poetic form is grounded in his experience of the life of faith: a guiding structure that opens up new possibilities for freedom.

CLAUDIA STANEK

Birches

See, against the light? The body's
landscape is marked by pain's highway.
Fracture lies within. The glowing
Sea of the mind-stream twists itself
Into noir nano-second glass.
God plants you beneath birches.
Angels rattle the leaves in chant.

Doubt

From your faith,
sirens sound.

Crows call and
tongues scream.

Bright vacuum holds
your soul,

clutches remorse, collects
shed skin

atop a black
sky blanket.

Spirits are disused,
broken shields.

This is not
their purpose.

The window obscures
your presentiment.

You cannot enter
Peace out

of the red
clay ground.

Claudia M Stanek's work has been turned into a libretto, been part of an art exhibition, and been translated into Polish. Her poems exist online, in print, and in her chapbook *Language You Refuse to Learn*. She holds an MFA from Bennington College. Her rescued dogs try to manage her life.

MAURA J. HARRISON

Marianne Stokes’ “St. Elizabeth of Hungary Working for the Poor”

When Marianne began to paint, she found
me sewing clothes in crisp and clearing light.
She knew my eyes were tired, all watered down
with blurring tears, two seas of mourning sight.

And now it’s months since Ludwig’s death, and still
My sight is tossed about and stitches drip:
The wandering threads of white get lost, they spill
Into the folds, more white, a swimming slip

Into the linen on my lap. My stitch—
A pierce and then a pull—moves prayer across
My heart and tacks the pain in place, a niche
For sacrifice where I can love my loss.

Her title says I’m working for the poor:
But I am thinking of a humble bread,
Hidden and cloaked, of roses red, of more
insight on how to ply my prayerful thread.

Maura H. Harrison is a photographer, graphic designer, and poet. She is currently a student in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. She lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

SARAH SIMS

Blackberry Blood

I.

Late August humdrum heat hanging
from brittle bushes by the nearly dried-up crick
We smell them first -- floral warmth and woody delicacy--
astonished by this incense rising
unwilled and wild from the thicket.
We are pulled feet-first into the cool,
reaching high for this deep purple harvest
some so ripe they crumble,
each crowned with thorns.

II.

People will ask about the lash marks on our legs,
the stain beneath our nailbeds for days to come.
Another scent now--metallic and earthy.
We pull away sharply as our wrists catch and knuckles scrape
--some of our bounty topples into the trickle below.
We nurse our wounds, wash our hands of this sacrifice.

III.

Hours later we emerge from the shade
of this weeping garden to scale the bald hill
down which water and berry and blood
all together flow.

To Hold Resilience In Your Hands

To hold resilience in your hands,
trace the lightning lines on its surface
with your thumbnail, bruised and cracked.

Deep blue and the size of a walnut,
scarred and scratched,

it can be held for all its weight
or set down and left forever.

Roll it around between your palms
until it glows as an ember,

leaves patterns imprinted on your skin,
and you know what to do next:

all that has been asked of you.
To hold resilience in your hands is to hold

the first baby tooth lost,
the last lily petal fallen.

To hold resilience is to handle
a head of late-spring lettuce,

to catch the wayward rubber ball on its way
back up from the ground,

or--to hold an emerged life, still blinking
and gurgling and drawing breath,

and realising
it is your own.

You are the funeral fern propagated and planted
growing long in the light of a new windowsill

You are the adult tooth
pushing in where a gap was left.

Sarah (Kalthoff) Sims is a Midwest-raised, Pacific Northwest-based poet. She holds a B.A. in English from Hope College in Michigan and is currently an M.F.A. candidate in creative writing at Seattle Pacific University. You can find more of her work in Ekstasis Magazine, Reformed Journal, and Collision Magazine.

When she is not writing, Sarah works with students, gets good use out of her raincoat, and taste-tests baked goods with her husband.

EDEN THEULE

Blessed are the Poor

“[Love is] tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless,
always lying in the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people’s doorsteps
and in roadsides under the sky”

-Plato, *The Symposium*

When I see that sycamore tree,
Leafless under the blazing sky,
It’s only an image, the impression of light
Against the retina, flipped and shuffled
From eye to mind. If I were to hold
The tree in my arms or even be held
In its branches, would I possess it even then?
Maybe partly, for the space of a minute,
Before it’s scooped up into the unwitnessable.
The gift is always larger the hands I reach
To take it with – it pours between my fingers
And I’m left panting in the sand.
The needing never stops, however
Much light is poured down on us,
Drowsing over petitionary prayers,
Unsatisfied with comfort,
Holding on for Dear Life
(Because, God knows, it is dear)
To our craving for bread, tomorrow as today,
And for something better than what we want now.

Eden Theule is a cook, flower grower, and emerging poet living on the Central Coast of California. She is a recent graduate of Biola University, where she worked as editor-in-chief of *Inkslinger* literary journal. Her poetry pulls together her broad interests in literature, agriculture, spiritual formation, and food.

JONATHAN CHAN

against bitterness

“Here are my hands.
With bowed head, I give them to you.
Look, the old wounds have yet to heal.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh

on the day of missed silences, the only word uttered
was for a patch of empty sky. each moment felt
off-centre, space filled by a trickle of chatter.
then only the watching, and the waiting, and the
silent inward wailing could suffice. i took it all
in, knowing the final rest that waits beyond
the river, flowing toward the ocean. of which we are
each a drop, yet also are. you, an ocean, and me.
like the sky suddenly becoming full, galaxy laid over
galaxy, supernovas contained, all until the beginning
and the end offer a whisper. i rein it in to the moisture
of both eyes, shoulders stiff in streams of words
that multiply, the cold, enveloping, as a line running.
waited for adage to make the taste sweet, for
beauty to crash through the windows of a house, for the
sweat beneath latex gloves to dry. swatted away the
stubborn creep of bitterness. never bitterness. we are against
bitterness. more light, more light. better to be visible than
invisible, dazzled than cynical. i flipped through pages.
remembered the child’s flesh becoming warm. bleeding
desperation expressing itself in a touch. garment loose
between fingers. groan and relief resting on a gleaming edge.
i slowed my breathing. looked out as the fields rolled by.
watched the dance of rain. watched how it turned to snow.

prayer

assuming a bedside manner,

body supine, back aching, midnight shade

taut across

the ceiling, the walls, the lines echo –

‘far from the kingdom, how steady

is the room.’

steady for a dream, the lush ferment

of green, walking along

the tangle of orchards, walking

with a three-mile-an-hour

god,

listening, plodding, bearing all

the weight,

and all the grief,

of an oxygen sapped. night speech

is like a still

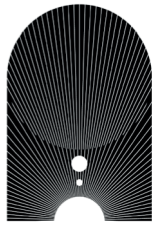
performance. he unfurls a hand, points

to the four corners veiled in mist,

the blue sky spreading over a thousand

lengths, the sundial waiting as the bones
of a chapel. a monastic sits,
aflake in black ecstasy, sharpening
and seething, counting the interruptions
of a burning
bush.
in the garden, the grass is fine as floss,
the grass is blue as jade.

Jonathan Chan is a writer and editor of poems and essays. Born in New York to a Malaysian father and South Korean mother, he was raised in Singapore and educated at Cambridge and Yale Universities. He is the author of the poetry collection *going home* (Landmark, 2022). He has recently been moved by the work of Lorine Niedecker, Claudia Rankine, and Neil Gaiman. He has an abiding interest in faith, identity, and creative expression. More of his writing can be found at jonbcy.wordpress.com



FICTION

RACHEL E. HICKS

Drink It Dry

The old woman lies in the smoky dark and grins at the sound of Mao Mao, her rooster. The new Li Jing Tian Cheng apartment residents must be turning over in their beds, cursing his hoarse croak—it's only four o'clock in the morning. She pulls the padded cotton quilt over her toothless mouth and giggles quietly as he croaks again, a withering sound just outside her window. She clucks softly and he hops up on the sill, squeezing through the empty panes. He lands dustily on her stomach, peering toward her face with no affection in his bleak stare. Still, she grabs his feet and runs her palm over his back, and he lets her. She shifts to one side to keep the light from the newly installed lampposts by the playground out of her eyes, a gritty feeling gathering in her stomach. Lately, it all presses against her wall, her chest—middle-class children in bright clothes shrieking outside in the evenings, grannies in pleather sneakers carrying purses and knitting bags scolding them just to hear their own voices, the way her view of the Ba river closed up and disappeared little by little with each new high-rise. And later this morning, her meeting with Cadre Wu, the local party leader.

After a moment, Mao Mao disappears again through the window and she sighs. She looks up toward the hole in the farmhouse roof that she can't quite see—the lamppost light doesn't reach that far. She meant to get the hole at the base of the chimney repaired. It has been letting in rain and even, last week, a snake. She shudders at the thought of the wet slap its thin body made hitting the cement floor; without thinking she had turned and hacked it in half with the knife she was using for cutting

garlic. Then she had sat down shakily on her plastic stool to watch its writhing come to a slow stop.

She wonders about the snake. Was it an omen? She'll ask her neighbor up the hill, Li Sun, to come fix the hole for her. Yes, he would do that. She'll give him some cabbage and a pouch of the Pu'er tea leaves Cadre Wu, who visited yesterday, gave her. She frowns in the dark. Cadre Wu had startled her.

She was struggling to open her eyes after her midday rest, and she had realized with a start that a figure was standing in her open doorway. She raised herself with a grunt and grabbed her cane, which she used now occasionally, thrusting it toward the door.

“Who's there?”

“Forgive me, Auntie. It is Cadre Wu come to see you.” As her eyes adjusted, she saw him bow deeply. When he straightened, he pushed his sunglasses up onto the top of his head and smiled at her. His eyes were a bit too large and drooped on the outside edges, and his face was round and smooth. She thought of a picture she'd seen in her granddaughter's school book of a moon with a face. He had a tight crew cut and wore a white, stiff shirt tucked neatly into black pants. His black shoes had a new layer of dust, but looked recently polished. “Auntie, are you well today? How are your cabbages?”

She frowned at him and set about making tea. “Come,” she said, putting her dead husband Lao Yi's cup down on the table. Cadre Wu came in, bowed again, and sat down on the stool. He folded his hands in his lap and they looked at each other. It came to her then—a memory of Wu as a child, her son's classmate. Her son had implicated Wu as ring leader of a group of boys who had terrorized the farmers' dogs in the hills—using handmade slingshots to shoot them with sharp rocks. After several weeks of this, a group of farmers came down and confronted the

boys after school, when parents and grandparents were there to collect them. Wu hung his head and stayed at the back of the group until her son confessed that it had been his idea. He was always a bit intimidated by Wu. The old woman remembered how, as the embarrassed headmaster focused the heat of his fury on her son, the corner of Wu's mouth had twitched upward, a convenient tear on his cheek.

“Auntie,” he began, “how is your granddaughter? Does she have a good job in Shenzhen?”

She snorted and looked away. “I don't know.”

“I bet she is doing well. Is she taking good care of you? Sending you money?” He studied her carefully as he said this. In her mind she saw Fei Fei, her pouty lips and tight jeans, her nonchalant wave as she boarded the bus. She had known then she'd never hear from her, even if she managed to stay alive and out of trouble.

“Not a jiao.” She didn't want Fei Fei's money, if it ever came. Her response seemed to animate Cadre Wu; he sat up straighter and leaned forward.

“You know, your husband was a good worker. His memory should always be honored in this community.”

The water was ready and she poured it over the pinch of leaves in his cup. Lao Yi had been an average farmer; he had done nothing with vigor or passion. It was true that he left no enemies, which perhaps was somewhat remarkable. No one in the town missed him greatly, but neither did they have any bitter remarks upon his departing. The fact that they could each console her with an honest, kind word about him when he passed lifted them in their own estimation; they experienced a small surge of genuine goodwill, and it pacified their consciences for a time. She wondered where Cadre Wu was headed.

“How are your new neighbors, eh? These apartment buildings are first rate. I heard word that even a foreign family will be renting one next month—the new English teacher at No. 2 Middle School. Americans.” So, that was it. She glanced out of the window at the new buildings. Construction crews were working on the newest one, just meters from the northern curve of her farmhouse wall. A foreign family. Americans. She sat down on the other stool.

“Too noisy. Kids on the playground late at night.” The playground abutted the closest wall, and kids were always pelting things at Mao Mao, for fun. City kids. The city of Bazhong used to hug the river, a mile east, but it was fattening up and spreading its girth right up to the edge of her land. New development, business, even a highway under construction to link up with the Cheng Ya expressway. She didn’t understand what was fueling it, feeding it. Now she was on the frontline, behind her the terraced plots of other farmers, other families who fed themselves and the growing city. Ridiculous—that they should be swallowed up, bought out like the others, the ones whose ancestral land now groaned under the weight of these seven-story apartment buildings. Who would feed the city, if they did not? She felt the grit in her stomach, the scrape of it deepening, widening. She didn’t understand.

“Ah, kids! They must have a little play, I suppose. A little relief from their studies. Don’t mind them.” She studied his face as he spoke, and the dough of his face tensed a little. The blood ran more quickly in her veins, hot with growing hostility. But it must not show. She scraped the tip of her cane across the cement, back and forth, as if absent-mindedly. Cadre Wu began to shift on his stool. He cupped his hand around the tea cup and slurped noisily. Lao Yi’s cup. She restrained herself from grabbing it out of his fleshy hand, and looked toward the door. Mao Mao high-stepped over the threshold, blank eyes on Cadre

Wu's back. He stopped and screeched once, without a warm-up croak, and Cadre Wu's tea sloshed into his lap. His head whipped around so fast that his sunglasses flew off his head, cracking one lens on the floor.

She cackled, jiggling the phlegm in her throat, and spat to the side. "Scared of a chicken, Cadre Wu? In need of a little re-education on the farm, eh?"

Cadre Wu picked up his glasses slowly, testing the cracked lens with his pudgy forefinger. Without looking at her, he said—more to himself than to her—"Bazhong is getting better. Change is good." He stood up and bowed slightly, narrowed eyes on the cock. "I brought you a gift." He handed her a bright red gift bag. "In honor of your husband." He stepped over the threshold, placing the sunglasses carefully over his eyes. "Please come to the apartment office tomorrow morning. I would like to discuss something. 9:00."

She forces herself to lie still until she can feel dawn slithering up the other side of the mountain, pale gray and silent. Behind closed eyes she sees the farm mongrels stirring up and down the terraced plots, shaking their heads and blinking toward the dim east. She needs to use the toilet.

Mao Mao swivels his stringy neck at her as she shuffles out the door and crosses to the outhouse. Stars are fading and the air is soft and warm. She squats with difficulty, grasping the wooden dowel rod she screwed into the back of the door so she can keep her balance.

As she walks back to the house, she clears her nasal passages and hocks the phlegm toward Mao Mao, who steps gingerly over it. She begins to prepare water for tea. Pinches dry leaves from the package with stout fingers, drops them into a stained cup. It is one of only two left on

the shelf. She pauses, gazing at the other cup, the one Lao Yi used every day. It's still there.

The morning fifteen-year-old Fei Fei left to find factory work in Shenzhen, the old woman had taken down her granddaughter's cup and thrown it out the window. Lao Yi had looked up at his wife over his own cup, set it down, and gone outside to sweep up the pieces. He buried them behind the outhouse with the others.

But Lao Yi's cup still sits on the shelf. He hadn't meant to leave. He had shrugged a silent, jovial apology and rested his head back on the pillow, smiling as he went. She knew the smile was because she was strong, and her health would not fail for a long time yet; he was sorry to be the weaker, but knew she would forgive.

Already it's been one year and she still feels steady strength in her fingers, in her taut wrists and short, bowed legs. She sips her tea and stirs her rice porridge. Outside the open door, Mao Mao begins again. She closes her eyes to listen, her heart drawn to him and his raspy throttle. Each month he sounds more and more like his neck is being twisted, but he crows on and still walks along the border wall with a proud strut.

When the sun peeks over the ridge above her house, she is already walking the short rows of cabbages in back with her dipping bowl. She inspects each head and sprinkles the ground around it with water. Her fingers pry cabbageworm larvae off a few heads; she spits and curses. Li Sun will send his daughter by in a few days to carry some of the cabbages to the market for her. She hopes most of the heads will be healthy.

She stoops to pinch off another larva and grinds it under her plastic sandal. Then she walks to the spigot beside the house and refills her bowl. Returning to the cabbages, she waters them slowly, frowning.

She stops at the end of the last row. The bowl is empty in her hand. She looks at the lightening hills behind her. Perhaps two more hours until 9:00. The cracked sunglasses, the fleshy face, the request—no, command—that she come to the office. For what? What does she have that he needs? A lightness, a current, runs through her chest. As it did when the snake fell.

Children in red scarves are pouring out of the apartment stairwells, kicking and teasing each other as they walk to school. She waits until they are out of sight and then grabs her cane, walks the gravel lane to the corner, stepping onto the sidewalk near the Hu Hui convenience store. Another corner and she is outside of the Li Jing Tian Cheng apartment office.

In the large window she sees a model, astonishingly detailed, of the whole complex. She's never seen something like this before. There's a miniature black front gate with its arched sign, the guard house. Trim lanes curve around the tall buildings, past the two playgrounds—tiny slides! She is disoriented—where is the hill whose feet rest in her cabbage patch? In her mind, the schoolchildren walk in reverse, back through the tiny front gate, separating into the tributaries of lanes that lead to the different buildings. Which one leads to the playground, the one by her low wall? Where is—?

She steadies herself against the glass. Leans her forehead against its coolness. Where the wall should be, curving inward by the climbing bars, there is no wall. Another seven-story structure stands there, the outer wall of the complex behind it jutting right up against the bottom of the hill. She steps back, spits to clear her head. Cadre Wu's moon face hovers in front of her, his lips touching Lao Yi's cup. A small sound, a *yip!* escapes her mouth. She looks around with narrowed eyes, then walks home, grinding her cane tip into dirt at each step.

9:00 comes and goes.

About an hour later she hears car tires on gravel. She is sitting in the shade at the back of the house, peeling apart two cabbage heads, dropping the cupped leaves into a basin of water. She doesn't look up. More than one door opens, closes quietly. More than one set of feet walking toward her. They stop in the sun—she sees six black shoes, two sandaled feet. Li Sun. She looks up. He is grinning at her, hands pressed as in prayer, already pleading. Cadre Wu and two others she doesn't know stand erect.

“Good morning, Auntie. Cabbages good?” Cadre Wu seems pleased, animated by this challenge. He crosses his arms and smiles. She doesn't answer. “The sun is high, Auntie. Remember we agreed to meet at 9:00? Apartment office? No problem. It's easy to forget. Shall we have our little talk here?” They each take a step closer. Li Sun slides into the shade beside her, touches her shoulder. She squints up at him—he stands ready to betray her—but how? For what gain?

“Auntie, you see the progress we are making here in Bazhong. In three months we'll be connected to the Cheng Ya Expressway—already businesses are coming here from Chengdu. Our people are profiting, everyone working together to make Bazhong a great city.” Cadre Wu speaks quietly, the prepared speech rolling easily off his tongue. “In each age, the people do their part. Auntie, it's a new age of revolution. You and your husband have served the community well for many years. Now we need you to serve in a new way.”

To disappear. To lie down among the cabbages and sink into the soil. She can already smell it on her skin. The curved roof tiles, the water spigot, the stick broom, the chimney—seeds for growth. In her mind she sees a building rising up from her floor, herself lying in its long arm of

shade reaching across the cabbage field. Broken and buried with the teacups.

Li Sun bends toward her, hands still pressed. “It’s time. That’s all. What else can we do?” Cadre Wu coughs once. “They will take care of us—apartment, food, clothing. A good exchange—we help Bazhong, our needs are supplied. You don’t need any more of this hard work. Time to rest. Enjoy life!”

“Auntie, we have workers scheduled to come in one week. That should give you enough time to move your things. Mr. Li will help you—he can show you later today the apartment we’ve picked out just for you. It’s by the river—a nice view to thank you for your service. And easy to do your washing from the bank.”

The grit has turned to a solid stone. She touches her stomach tenderly. Her nostrils flare and she picks up her cane, points it at the black car in the sun. Her cane shakes slightly, which enflames her further. She jabs it at the car again, brushing off Li Sun’s hand on her shoulder. The men bow slightly and turn to go. Cadre Wu turns back once.

“Next week. Tuesday. You’ll be ready.”

There is quiet conversation at the side of the car. Li Sun watches the other men get in, hesitates, then turns away from her and begins walking up the hill on the farmer’s path. It is getting hotter. The water in the basin holds cups of cabbage leaves, drops glistening on pale green. She carefully lifts one foot at a time and submerges them in the cool water, leaning her head back against the side of the house. In her mind the snake continues to writhe after it is cut in two. Did it imagine it had a chance?

Li Sun didn’t come by later to show her the apartment. Either he was afraid of her, or he knew she wouldn’t go. His daughter came two

days later, however, and loaded fifteen of the best cabbage heads into her baskets. Her eyes took in a quick survey of the house and the small parcel of land; the old lady knew she'd been told to look for signs of preparation, of acquiescence. There were none.

The following evening she leans against her low wall, watching the children play on the slides and climbing bars. Each time one of them shrieks, her eyes narrow. Mao Mao stalks the wall beside her. Once in a while she leans to the side and spits the phlegm she hocked up. The other grannies gather in clucking huddles, watching her from the corners of their eyes. So, they know. Most likely everyone knows by now, is counting the days until Tuesday. They see her watering her cabbages each morning, see her make a show of moving slowly down each row, tipping her bowl. They see smoke curling from her chimney each morning and night, see her taking her tea on the back porch in the evenings. No one visits her.

They don't see her fingers shake as she pinches tea leaves and drops them into her cup. They don't see her scanning her roof, or the floor, for snakes, or the way she holds Mao Mao more tightly to her when he lets her, running her hand down his feathers. How she touches her fingertips to her doorframe each time she walks through it now, rubs them in the oil splatters on her wall near the stove.

Monday night she lies in bed and reaches her hand through the open pane, opens and closes her fist. How strange her thick fingers appear against the moonlight, the occasional cloud. She can feel her cabbages pulling life from the soil out back, growing heavy and full. All these things. Things she can touch, that contribute to the sum of her unremarkable life, each day much like the last. The day they were married, Lao Yi tripped on the threshold when they were entering the

house. He had laughed there, on his knees on that floor, one hand covering his mouth. He lacked any self-consciousness, did not worry that she would think him foolish. She had just shaken her head and pulled him up, smiling a little.

All these things: the cups, the rough cement floor, the grease stains, the old, padded cotton quilt. She runs her hands over it. Lao Yi bought it new after their son's delivery—the old lady flushes with shame in the dark at the thought of all that blood, of her daughter, then four, standing against the wall with her hand over her mouth. Useless child. Thin bones like her father. Her movements always in haste, without actually being helpful. Dropping things. Crying often, silently—this always puzzled the old woman. Her anger always flared up when she would see those thin shoulders shaking. And how her son grew to torment the girl! He was base and broad and completely unsentimental. She hasn't missed them since they left years ago for migrant work in Shanghai, but is glad they still return for Spring Festival each year. Though she doesn't pine for them, she expects that annual duty and is glad for the extra money they send.

She is awake in the lightening dark. The humidity is thicker than yesterday, and she can feel a light line of sweat on her upper lip and forehead. She wonders how to steel herself against the crowd she knows will be watching, imagines remaining in the house until brought out by force—what would that be like? Maybe she should stand in a strategic place instead: between the front door and the apartment wall. Will anyone be moved to pity? Does she want them to pity her?

She is still considering all of this as she pours her tea. Lao Yi's cup rests beside her on the table this morning—she pours a little tea into it. “Gan bei,” she whispers in a toast—*drink it dry*.

She hears the beeping of a truck backing up at the same time she becomes aware of murmuring conversation outside. She picks up both tea cups and walks to her door. A foreman is waving the truck closer down her lane. Two other workers in hard hats stand smoking to the side of the house, near the cabbage patch. Already there are ten to fifteen of her new neighbors gathered on the other side of the wall. No one looks her in the eye.

More workers—day laborers—appear on the gravel road from behind the truck. They are carrying empty boxes and a few rice paper bags. As they hesitate in front of her, she squats down stiffly and sits on the threshold. They look at each other, then step past her, brushing against her, and disappear into the house. She hears quiet shuffling as they begin putting things in the boxes and bags—her few dishes, pots and pans, quilt and bedding. They discover the back door, which they use to load up the truck.

Then, a different sound, coming from above—a sliding and *chinking*. She turns around and sees the darkness of the room pierced with slants of light. Dust dances in the thick shafts of light and for a moment she is breathless with the beauty of the light breaking through, illuminating the singularity of her small life.

The shattering of roof tiles at her feet startles her. Workers are crawling like crabs along her roof, using their feet to push the curved tiles down the slope of the roof to the ground below. She looks into the faces of her neighbors. Some of them hold her gaze almost with hostility. Others look away. Mao Mao appears behind her, clucking quietly. She stands and walks back through the house, now mostly empty and open to the sky above, to the back door. Mao Mao follows her out into the garden, where she sets down the tea cups, fills the water bowl, and begins walking her cabbage rows, sprinkling the dirt. Li Sun and his daughter

stand at the end of one row. He holds one hand out to her. She smiles at him and continues to water. At the end of the next row she sees a pair of dusty black shoes.

“It’s time, Auntie.” Cadre Wu is sweating heavily, his white shirt stuck to his stomach. She can’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but she stares in his face. She takes a step closer and he flinches slightly. Slowly she pours a stream of water from her bowl onto his shoes until they gleam.

“You should wear different shoes on a farm, Cadre Wu. See, I’ve cleaned them for you.” There is a chuckle, a hoot, from the growing crowd. She is surprised by a small surge of pity for Cadre Wu, who steps back angrily.

“It is time for you to go!” he says, his voice raised. Then, glancing at the crowd, he reverts to an obsequious tone. “Come, we have a wonderful new home for you. Your friend will take you.” He beckons to Li Sun.

She feels her friend’s arm around her shoulder, but she doesn’t budge. She watches the giant claw of the excavator raise itself above the far wall of the house, feels the vibration in her bones as it swings down and smashes through concrete. She will watch it all, every minute of it, she knows now. She will remain in the center—this one life, her beating heart, strong arms and bowed legs, the grease stains and broken cups—while they tear it down around her.

Cadre Wu says, “Come” once more, then shakes his head and walks over to the wall. “Stubborn!” he says to the people watching. He tries to grin. “Doesn’t realize she’s getting a good deal.” Another crash. Dust obscures everything momentarily. Cadre Wu coughs, waving a hand in front of his face. As the dust clears, the crowd sees the old woman motionless, facing the ruination of her home. Her blouse is missing a

button in the middle, and a tuft of her gray hair sticks up on one side. Dust has settled in a fine layer on her arms and face, which displays a mixture of resolution and shock.

Her new neighbors shuffle their feet, begin to glance down. “A good deal!” Cadre Wu repeats, coughing again. “A modern apartment, near the river.” He holds out his hands to the crowd.

By ones and twos, they begin to walk away. Another crash. All that is left now is the western wall. And the rows of cabbages. A small child with a thin line of snot running from his nose is led away past Cadre Wu; he giggles at his sweaty moon face. Cadre Wu turns away, back to the old woman, whose back is turned against him. Rage lunges through him like a tiger, startling him.

In the last hour of dark the next morning, the old woman reaches out her hand for the window. It scrapes against rough cement. A momentary heave of fear disorients her. She rubs her hand along the wall, clucks softly to Mao Mao in the darkness, listens for his scratchy step outside the window on the opposite wall. All is silent in Li Sun’s farmhouse. Everything is strange. In two more months, he will also have to vacate, do his part for this new era of revolution. She clucks again, but Mao Mao doesn’t come. Suddenly she needs to hold his stringy body against her chest. She sits up slowly and shuffles to the door. It’s darker up here on the hillside. Down below the terraced fields, Bazhong curves like a gluttonous dragon along the river, its golden lights shining even at this hour.

As she pauses outside the threshold to let her eyes adjust, a pungent, warm odor wafts up from her feet. Trembling, she reaches down and her fingers brush sticky feathers. The old cock lies still in a dark puddle of blood, his neck at a right angle.

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NOAH J. CRAIG

The Last Word

They called him Enoch.

He had a gift—no one knew exactly what it was, but they knew who he was and what he did and called it a gift.

He felt its burden. The weight of a word, in judgement or in mercy. But he was just the messenger—everyone knew that. He spoke what was given to him to speak. He carried the words around with in his satchel. He lifted the words out and tossed them to the recipients. Words they must accept, because they couldn't change the words. They could never change the words, only hear them. So they listened, sometimes in fear, in expectation, in dread, in anticipation.

Prophet.

Priest.

Punisher.

They couldn't decide what to call Enoch other than his name. Because he was different things to them at different times. One word would be joyful and the next be disastrous. Black or white. Gray. Gray words sometimes hurt the most.

But Enoch was the son of a prostitute.

They drove Enoch away. Banned from his own town. Given over to the wolves. Or so they thought.

For it was only by the wolves that Enoch's words grew teeth. Only by the wolves were words packed into sentences. Only by the wolves did Enoch learn how to carry the satchel. The satchel, once a cow, had been cracked by time and dirt. A single flap guarded its trove. Enoch never knew the secrets beforehand. He was just the messenger.

"Do you believe in God?" Enoch once asked a poor boy from a nearby village. The boy looked confused and said, "What is God?"

Enoch had reached into the satchel and fished around for the right word. He handed it to the boy. "He made everything."

"Oh, I see. He's the one who made me poor."

"He's the one who offers you riches."

Enoch had given the boy several more words. The boy had trouble hearing. But Enoch was a roamer. Never in one village for too long, lest they hear and not understand, lest they grow accustomed to the words and forget.

They called him Enoch but I called him desperate.

...

Enoch first came to me when I was reading the paper over my humble breakfast and coffee. Of course, I knew who he was. The last of the prophets. He certainly dressed like the last of them, anyway.

Enoch had never come to me before—of which, I was glad—but I had never felt the dread as I did then when he first came up those steps, with that look in his eye, focused solely on me.

I offered him a seat. He stood.

“I have a word from God for you,” he said, opening his satchel and digging in, all without ever breaking eye contact.

I bit my lip. “And what does it say?”

In that moment, that hesitation, I realized something about Enoch. He said, “I don’t know,” but I knew before he answered. Always the messenger, but never the recipient. And he knew it too.

He held out a glowing wafer to me. “Take it and eat.”

Once, I had heard of a man who refused to take the word—the word must be eaten. Enoch had crushed the word in his hand and blew the dust over the man. That man died later of sores and boils.

I reached out for the wafer and placed it on my tongue. Immediately, the wafer began to dissolve. A strange taste of honey filled my mouth.

Enoch dissolved from my vision and I found myself in a white room. Completely white. And bare. A voice boomed, “My servant.”

I flinched and cowered. No one was here with me. Just the voice.

It continued, “This is the word to you: Though Enoch has served me well, I have chosen you to take his place. You shall be My mouth and you shall utter My words to the people. Enoch will give you his satchel.”

The room faded and sprung back to life with Enoch before me. His eyes, emotionless, searched mine as if looking for a hint of what the wafer had contained.

“Thank you,” I said.

He nodded and turned to leave.

“Wait,” I called after him. “I need your satchel.”

Laughter erupted across his face before it left his lips.

“Enoch. I need the satchel. That’s what the wafer said.”

He composed himself. “The satchel is for the prophet. No one else.”

“The voice said I was to take your place. I need your satchel. You have served well but your time is done.” I could have sworn I saw a shadow darken his features but it must have been a trick of the light.

If you remember hearing about Enoch, you will have no doubt heard the proverb, “As the prophet flies.” Not to take credit for it, but I was part of the reason it came about. Enoch clutched the satchel and cursed at me. He sprinted down the stairs and ran off down the street. The people were confused at seeing the prophet run because usually it was the other way around.

I considered staying where I was, to finish breakfast, to ignore all of this. But I couldn’t. In fact, I felt compelled to retrieve the satchel. The word had come to me and spoke. The word had chosen me, just like it had chosen Enoch, the son of a prostitute. How could I not obey? ...

How do you go about finding a prophet on the lam? If it were Jonah, you would go sit on the shore and wait.

This was not Jonah.

Enoch had disappeared by the time I finally made it down to the street. Where would a prophet go? Did he have words left to give, other stops to make? Enoch had no hometown (anymore), no home, no family that I knew of. But I needed that satchel.

I got into my car and simply drove. Down the street Enoch had taken. I came up to an intersection and a choice. Left, right, or straight?

A homeless man held a tattered cardboard sign—“Work for food”—and I waved him over. He looked the worse for wear, weather-beaten and tired.

“Did you see Enoch come this way?”

His grim silence forced my hand. I pulled a bill out of my wallet and held it out like a carrot. “Work for food, right? Where’d he go?”

The man snatched at the bill but I pulled it back just in time. He smiled.

“He went that way,” he said, pointing to the left.

“Was he still on foot?” I made a show of magically doubling the green paper. The man nodded and I gave him his due. He shoved the bills into his pocket and whistled as he strolled back to his corner.

...

He didn’t take that long to find. In fact, it was as if he had hardly run away at all. He sat in the hollow of a doorway on the side of a building, watching me. He must have known I would follow. He looked somewhat resigned but there was a glimmer in his eye. “I need the satchel, Enoch.”

“As do I.”

“But I have been chosen.”

“Can the chosen become unchosen?”

I noticed the satchel wasn’t strapped over his shoulder. “Where is it? Where’d you put it?”

“Shall we cast lots for it?”

He pulled out two lots and designated himself as one and me as the other. I acquiesced only because he knew the location of the satchel. I’d humor him. Plus, the lots would clear things up for him.

“How do I know these are just lots?” I asked. “Accurate?”

He shrugged. “We can start by trying something else then. So you can find out for yourself.”

I thought for a moment. “I have a card in my pocket. This lot,” I held it up, “is ‘card’ and that other one is ‘no card.’ Five tries.”

I threw the lots five times. Each time, they came up ‘card.’ Enoch smiled to himself but I saw it before it disappeared.

“Again,” I said.

“You’re not satisfied? That was conclusive.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’re weighted.”

I tried again, but this time I switched which lot designated the ‘card.’ The ‘card’ lot came up again five times.

“Now for the satchel.” Enoch rubbed his hands together greedily. He enjoyed this, leaving it all in the hands of destiny. Surprising, in light of how hard he fought it by hiding the satchel.

“You know,” he said, “my mother, God rest her soul, left me quite young. Not that she wanted to, the disease didn’t care, but all the same. Ever since then, there have never been constants in my life. I don’t even sleep in the same town two weeks in a row.” He picked up the lots and handed them to me.

“But that satchel. When I was chosen—the satchel has been with me this whole time. Black is me, white is you.”

Both lots had come up equally before, so there didn’t seem to be an advantage either way and I didn’t mind.

“But even you had to have taken the satchel from someone else,” I said.

“No, no, it was mine from the start. Why would I plunder another man?” He let the question sting like a dagger.

I shook my head. “No more sob stories. Let the lots decide.”

He stared at me like a man who had never lost. “Do I look like I am crying?” “Best of five tries.”

I cast the first throw.

Black.

Enoch didn’t let his face betray anything. I collected the lots and threw again. Black.

A sense of doubt gnawed at me. Had I imagined all of it? If he won the next throw, he won the satchel.

White.

Relief swept over me.

White.

Enoch glared at me and I at him.

It all came down to this—the final throw.

“You don’t have to do this, you know. Gamble away like this,” Enoch said.

“Gamble? Is that what we have been doing?”

“I don’t suppose you will walk away?”

“Now you’re just scared you’ll lose.”

“Toss it.”

I threw the lots. They floated through the air. Twisting, spinning—white, black, white, black. We both knew the question we were really asking of them: who is the prophet? Enoch had been a prophet a long time. He knew how it worked. He knew his job. He knew lots.

Me, on the other hand... I was new to all of this. Just yesterday, I would have called this luck or fate or chance, depending on how I felt about my current state of affairs. Fate and chance. Fat chance. But now: the divine.

Enoch hadn't moved after the dust settled. We both simply stared at the lots on the ground for a long time, without acknowledging each other. No smiles and no tears. We had both realized that as soon as I had tossed the lots that it was all out of our hands, literally. And the prize, the satchel, wasn't even there to witness it.

Finally, Enoch stood, pushing himself up off the step, and emerged from the shadow of the doorway. A gust of wind brushed dust up between us until he closed the gap. He shook my hand, not limply but like a man. He bent to pick up the lots that showed black.

I was stunned, to be honest. How could there be contradictions between what the voice had said and the lots? Either I was the next prophet or I wasn't. Either I should have the satchel or I shouldn't. Either Enoch was done or he wasn't. The straight line had become a scribble. "I told you you could walk away," he said. "It would have been easier."

It was as if Enoch knew this would be the outcome. Enoch the prophet.

"I'll take leave of you now. I've got a satchel to start wearing again," he said. ...

During the night, the voice called to me three times. Twice, I waited, unsure what to do. The last time, the final call, I responded. "Yes?"

The voice confirmed what had already been spoken, word for word. The fact that I received a word at all without it having come from Enoch's hand was further proof of my new profession. At least, it seemed to me.

Only much later did Enoch reveal to me that he had had the same vision on the same night. But he had christened it a nightmare. I suppose for him, it was.

I spent the next hour pondering how I would get the satchel. Enoch would declare the lots had spoken but I would say that the voice had spoken. Twice. I had the sense that Enoch could not be reasoned with. Was it even worth all the trouble? Did I actually want the satchel, what it meant, the responsibility of it? Because that's what the satchel had come to be: a symbol of the office. It carried its own weight.

It wasn't even as if Enoch had done a bad job. In fact, he was the most feared man in the city, respected by the religious and the secular alike. I wouldn't be replacing an incompetent failure, but, rather, a legend in whose shoes I would trip. No man wants to follow up another when he knows that his best effort will fall so short that it would be as if he had never tried at all. ...

The next night, I awoke to a pounding on my door. I threw on a shirt and squinted through the peephole.

Enoch.

He pushed past me as I let him in. He was out of breath and collapsed in the chair by the bookshelf. He clutched the satchel to his chest with a death grip, gave it one last kiss, then held it out to me as if he were giving up his only child.

"Please," he said, "take it. Take it! Please."

The voice had said Enoch would give it to me. The voice was never wrong. But I didn't take it. I had to ask, after all of this.

“Why?”

“Please, please, here.” He practically threw it at me. I sidestepped and the satchel thumped against the floor.

Enoch's hands quivered and his eyes were swollen, rimmed in pink. After throwing the satchel, he managed to suck in a breath but he stayed plastered in the chair. He barely looked at me and avoided my gaze. Was the pain of parting with the satchel too much for him? “Why are you giving this up?” I asked.

He bit his lip and stared at me out of the corner of his eye, like a cornered dog. I wasn't scared of him though. Well, not before anyway. But now he had a desperation about him that would make any man dangerous. A blinder that only let him look one way and there was no stopping him once he got going.

“I need... I-I need,” he fumbled with his shirt, not making eye contact, “to stop all of it... Before, stop it before. There has to be a way...”

I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him until his head rolled my way and I could really see him and he could see me. “Talk straight, Enoch. Stop what?”

His pupils widened and then his head slumped forward. He muttered something under his breath.

“What was that?” I shook him again.

“I ate a wafer,” he cried. “I ate a wafer that wasn't mine. But it became mine. I just needed to know, to know what it said. You don't

blame me, do you? All this time, always giving and never knowing what I gave. I had to know, I had to eat it. But now..." "Go on."

His head rose and he set his jaw. "But now, I know. I know what the word was—it felt so heavy before, but now... I have the word but I need to stop it."

"What do you mean," I asked, "like prevent a prophecy?"

He nodded grimly.

"What was the prophecy?"

"There was not much to it"—he said it so matter-of-factly that I thought it might all be a hoax—"except that I will be dead in less than a day. Killed by something that I won't see coming."

I let go of his shoulders and stepped back, looking him over. He was the healthiest dying man I ever saw. Or would be once he got himself under control, of course. "Can you do that? Alter a destiny?" I said.

"That's why I want you to have the..." He didn't say the word but just pointed to it on the floor. "I figured maybe you could give me a new word. Something more palatable." We both stared at the satchel, just like when we had stared at the lots, but this time it was different because dying men have final wishes.

I picked up the satchel and slung it over my shoulder. Suddenly, it became heavy and I almost stumbled under its weight. Enoch smiled faintly, possibly remembering that feeling. "I just stick my hand in?"

"Yes. The right word will come to you," he said.

I opened the satchel and thrust my hand into the darkness. At first, my fingers grasped at nothing but air. Then, I felt it. At the very bottom, a single wafer. I hoisted it out and immediately the weight on

my shoulder lifted too. The wafer was just bigger than the size of a quarter and golden-brown. Only the fortunate called it gold.

“Here,” I held it out to him. “Take it and eat.”

He grinned at that, but a nervous one, and plucked the wafer with trembling fingers. He closed his eyes and his lips moved silently. All at once, he ate it, as if afraid a stray crumb would become the difference between gold and brown.

It was curious to watch him as he digested the word. A myriad of emotions welled in his eyes so that it was impossible to name even a single one. But it didn't last long. He didn't savor it like he should have.

“What'd it say?” I asked but then checked myself. I wasn't sure if I was allowed to ask. He grinned again but the corners of his lips shuddered. That told me all I needed to know. He had aged dramatically within the past five minutes. The wrinkles were deeper, the silver hair veering towards white.

He bade me to sit down and I did.

“Don't ever...” he began but then his voice trailed off on the next word.

I leaned forward to encourage him to try again.

“It's not an easy life you have ahead of you. You may hate it at first, then you may love it, but then you'll probably hate it again. It's a gift and a curse. God Himself declared you to be strong enough to hold the weight of His words. I saw you almost slip a minute ago. You'll never get used to that feeling and if you do, then you should retire yourself.”

“But why are you going to die?” I asked, naïvely assuming this to be an important matter. “I could ask you the same question,” he said quickly, but then composed himself. “It’s because I did get used to it. I didn’t realize it at first, but looking back, I can see it clearly. That’s how it always is, looking back and all. But I didn’t deal with it how I should have. I should’ve given it up or repented or something. But I carried on like the old fool that I am. And now,” his eyes lifted up towards heaven, “I’ve been given the divine pink slip.”

His tears were gone and the shaking had left his hands. His voice was even and steady, like he had done this willingly, wasn’t about to die, and was simply mentoring his pupil. A sudden admiration for him filled me then. A man, broken and beaten, who had found the strength to stare at tomorrow like it was today.

“What if,” my own voice sounded wrong disrupting the silence, “there was a way to prevent it? Like you said.”

“You already gave me another word. There’s nothing more that you can do. I’m sorry. Take the satchel.” He stood up to go.

“Wait, I mean it though. There may be a way. Maybe.”

“Well?”

“Lock yourself in an empty room. Don’t eat or drink. Don’t let anyone in. After the day has passed, come out again.” Unconsciously, I had been using my hands to convey the words but I caught them from rambling towards the end. Enoch didn’t need to be talked to like that.

Enoch mulled it over. I could see him debating his own thoughts, striking down the naysayers one by one.

“That might work. But what room do I use?”

“Since you’re already here, you can use one of mine. It’s almost bare, but I’ll move the desk. Don’t want a fatal fall. Come to think of it, you should probably lie down the whole time and remove that possibility altogether.”

He helped me move the desk, full of pens and papers and penicillin, and a box or two of books I hadn’t decided where to put yet. We rolled out a thick blanket on the floor for him. I figured a blanket couldn’t do much damage.

I waited on the threshold. “I’ll set a clock. After twenty-four hours, just to be sure, I’ll let you out. I won’t let anyone in. I won’t even come in.”

“Unless I say ‘revenant.’ Then you may come in.”

“Revenant,” I said. “Okay, revenant.”

I closed the door behind me and locked it.

...

I tried to keep one eye on the clock as I went about my day but I always found myself staring at it with two. I quickly got bored with reading, eating, writing, sleeping, cleaning, eating. And after all of that, I realized only four hours had passed.

Every so often, I would tiptoe past his door and listen. For strange sounds or, preferably, for his breathing.

I didn’t hear the bang until the seventh hour. I rushed to the door and stuck my ear against it. A few muffled sounds. Heavy breathing.

“Are you okay, Enoch?” I knocked on the door. “Everything good? Enoch?” The door shook back at me and I heard another crash. There was nothing in the room except Enoch and the rug. There was

nothing to crash or bang unless it was one of those two things. And rugs were soft.

“Just say the word, and I’ll come in. But you have to say it.” I got down on all fours and tried to look through the crack underneath the door. It was too difficult to see. “Say the word, Enoch. Please. Let me help you.”

Immediately, silence reigned.

“Enoch, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

I waited for five minutes to be sure, but he never replied. I would have to wait. Not that I wanted to. It ate at me on the inside that he could be in trouble but couldn’t speak, that he needed my help but couldn’t ask.

I sat in the living room and picked up the book that I had started earlier. My eyes flickered over the same paragraph again and again, trying to decipher the meaning behind the letters. My neck continually craned towards his door and I kept having to readjust myself. A crick began to form. I rushed to my feet at another noise, but it came from the front door. The doorbell.

I stayed where I was and prayed that they’d leave. They rang it again and hammered at the door. I made my way over.

“What?” I mumbled as I opened it.

“Is Enoch here? I need to see Enoch.” The man had a boyish haircut and peach fuzz. Young man, old boy.

“I don’t know where he is.”

“But I saw you two earlier. I saw him here. I need to speak with him, it’s important.” “I told you—”

“I’m not leaving until I talk with him.” He crossed his arms, as if that proved his point and gave him the right to squat.

I had seventeen hours before I could go into the room but I hated spending these minutes here. “I’ll relay the message.”

His eyes lit up in small victory. “So he is here. I thought so. Joe didn’t but I did. Let me see him.”

“Give me the message. He’ll decide whether its worth his time.”

The kid frowned. “Fine. He gave me a word the other day, but I want him to take it back.”

“That’s not how it works. Was it a bad word?”

“Well,” he said as he thought about it, “no. But I want something else. Let me talk to him.”

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing he can do for you. Goodbye.” I closed the door in his face and bolted it. He assaulted the door bell and the door but the sounds seemed to fade the farther I walked away and by the time I had retrieved my tea and sat down again, it was as if it had never happened.

Seventeen hours.

...

I yawned with my eyes and scrubbed them awake. The couch had been worse than I remembered. I pushed the book off my chest. It tumbled to the floor. Enoch had been in my dream. He had had his satchel over the wrong shoulder and people were feeding him wafers left and right. He kept eating and eating and his face got fat and crumbs followed him like a slug trail.

Enoch.

I checked my watch—it reported twenty-five hours.

I had overslept.

I tore down the hallway and fumbled the key into the lock.

“Enoch!” I yanked open the door.

The empty room answered. I rubbed my eyes again—this had to be a dream—but Enoch didn’t appear. The rug was there. Enoch wasn’t. On the wall, he had written something. The red letters were scribbled and dripping like a grotesque warning. This time I didn’t have to decipher anything.

God will not be mocked.

I ventured closer. I had taken everything out of the room except the rug—where had he gotten the ink? I touched the G.

My finger came away sticky.

Horror flooded me. The word had been fulfilled. We hadn’t been able to stop it. Shame on us for even thinking such thoughts. Enoch was gone for good.

I closed the door and locked it again. I wouldn’t be going back in there, probably ever. I retreated to the living room and came before the satchel, still laying where it had been, where I had discarded it the night before after pronouncing Enoch’s death sentence. My shoulders fell. There was no debate now. I was the only one left. I slung it over my shoulder, like he did, and the weight pulled me down. But there was no wafer inside.

...

“I called it a nightmare then. But I was so blinded with rage and fear, nightmare seemed too mild a term. Now, I see things a little bit

differently, of course. It's amazing how much clearer things are when you are farther away. You'd think it'd be the opposite."

Enoch sipped his tea in the chair across from me, in my living room. He had not changed much, maybe slightly whiter hair, but the man I had seen weeks ago had been several years older than the one I stared at now.

"I still don't understand it," I said. "And the message?"

He chuckled, "I heard you calling, 'Say the word, say the word' and I couldn't for the life of me remember the word. But now I am that word. I am revenant. I admit, the words on the wall were a little grisly, macabre even, but then again, you had taken away all the pens. What was I supposed to do? The appearance of it did not match what I meant at all. Really, I just wanted to encourage you. It did come across rather wrong, didn't it?"

"Slightly."

"I meant it positively. I can go clean it off for you if you want."

"No, no, I paid someone last week."

"I'll reimburse you then. I'm such a trouble sometimes."

"No, really, it's fine. You should have heard me trying to convince the guy I wasn't a serial killer."

He leaned back in amusement. "I can see it now."

I smiled. "But what are you doing here?"

He grew serious. "I've come back for the satchel."

My mouth went dry. The satchel had served me well the past two weeks, ever since I had found the courage to start wearing it.

Dare I say, I even liked it.

His stare fractured into crow's feet. "I'm just kidding. Oh my word, the look on your face. No wonder he thought you were a serial killer."

"I'm surprised your humor didn't die with you."

"Well, we're all full of surprises, aren't we? I was on my way to Mars when I decided to stop by. It didn't feel right, leaving you like this, without saying anything." I perked up. "Mars?"

"Yes, Mars. That day in the room was actually very good for me. Most people will see it as my death, but I see it rather more like a... graduation, of sorts. You see, I grew so attached to that stupid satchel that my whole life revolved around it—it was my life. So be warned. Anyway, I needed to die. There was no way that I could move into this second phase, my next task, while still playing around in that first one."

"What is your next task?"

"Oh, I'm still a prophet, if that's what you mean. I just have a different audience now. The heavens declare the glory of God and proclaim the work of His hands. They pour forth speech day and night and their words go out into all the world. My task now is to relay to them those words. I give 'wafers' to the stars. Not wafers, mind you, but you get the idea.

"But you," he said, "are taking over for me around here. They need you. The words they get from you will be a lot more audible than the ones they get from me."

"Any tips for an old friend?"

He wagged his finger. "God will not be mocked."

"No, He won't."

We laughed together until he had to go.

...

It had taken a while for the people to get used to me. My style, versus Enoch's. Even just the sight of me wearing Enoch's satchel. But eventually, they came around. Enoch's death caused quite a stir. The room in my house had been pictured on the front page for several days running. I have lost track of the number of times I was interrogated. The missing body drove some souls to become afraid and a few heroes to search for it—mostly, it made the people afraid. How could Enoch, of all people, die? What did it mean for the rest of us? I gave a few words of encouragement here and there but mainly hoped that it would all pass away silently like a dream.

In any case, the people agreed that Enoch had been a good man and good riddance. His words were too harsh, too close to home, too true. They hoped I would be better. Be better than a good man, John, be a great man. Go easy on us, we've had this burden for over forty years. I hadn't realized Enoch had been so adept at rejecting bribes. Now, I needed to be as well. Enoch's memory wouldn't die with him. I'd make sure of it. He had become too important to me. I always go outside after dinner to catch the nightly news. No matter what they said, he was more than a good man. They were and always had been afraid of him. And that fear had clouded their judgement of him. He was dangerous to them. After his death, they thought up a whole list of new names to call him. But I called him Enoch.

Noah J. Craig is an author and a poet who hopes that his words will glorify the ultimate Author. Originally from New England, he currently lives in Henderson, Nevada. If he's not writing or reading or drinking coffee, he is most likely halfway up a mountain wishing he had more storage space on his camera. You can visit him online at noahjcraig.com.



HOMILIES

EMMANUEL BOSTON

Paradise of Remembrance — *A Homily on Luke 23*

We have forgotten God's faithfulness and we have forgotten our faithlessness, but Jesus takes our forgetfulness and promises to remember us faithfully.

Though we forget, we are not forgotten.

The Problem of Memory

Memory is a problem. The older we get, the more often we walk from one room to another only to have forgotten what brought us there in the first place. The humor of age and memory fades quickly for those who have loved ones who suffer more severely.

If you've ever known someone with dementia or Alzheimer's, you know the pain of forgetfulness. Names and memories begin to slip away and personality traits that were hidden beneath the surface become more prominent. The strange behaviors of the ones we love become a source of pain, and we begin to wonder if they're even the same person. Much of our relationships depend upon shared memory, things that we can recall. Is your parent really your parent if they can't remember you as their child? Memory Loss affects us as a result of the fall, but it was not intended to be our common experience.

The intent of a delightful land (Genesis 1-2)

When God created us, he created us as his image-bearers: those who would represent him to the world. We were intended to enact his character and presence for the whole world. We were a monument of God... one might even say that we were supposed to remember him for the benefit of all. We were intended to dwell in the delightful land of God's presence. A place where memory was not something distant, but something actual—the same way that spouses 'remember' their wedding vows by daily practicing acts of love. We were intended to inhabit the garden paradise and to expand God's creative love to the end of all creation.

The accusations against God (Malachi 3)

And yet despite the invitation to live in constant memory of God's beauty

and love, our first parents chose to forget God's words. "Did God really say?" the serpent asked. And though we knew what God had really said, we chose to forget the promise and to believe a lie. We chose to inhabit the world of the serpent instead of the world of God. We chose to disown and forget God's goodness instead of relishing in it.

Malachi 3 shows us how far we have gone to forget God's goodness. "How have we wearied God?" we ask like a child looking for excuses. "By saying that we have worshiped him in vain." How often we look to things we have done and believe that God has been unjust in our portion. "Look at everything I have done," we want to say, "and God has not repaid me as is my due!" We speak as though we could persuade God's action. And we forget not only God's goodness throughout our life, but we forget our own sinfulness. We forget God's faithfulness and we forget our own faithlessness.

The Book of Remembrance (Revelation 13:8)

But God has not forgotten us. Like Adam and Eve we forget that he has given us every tree of the garden, and we forget that we have left him for the lie of the snake. Like the priests in Malachi's prophecy, we forget that God has promised to dwell with his people through their faithfulness, and we forget that we have illegitimately demanded God respond to our timeline and practices. Like our beloved companions that suffer from memory loss, we have forgotten the things that have mattered most, and we have become like different people.

But God has not forgotten us. Though we forget, we are not forgotten.

God promised his people through the prophet Malachi that he would prepare a book of his people. He would write down their name and gather them as his inheritance. He would inscribe our name like a King writes down the deeds of victories won and children's inheritances. In that day, the Day of the Lord, when fire purifies the earth, he will save his precious treasure; they will not be forgotten. But how can this be? How can God remember us despite our failing? How can God inscribe our name when it is tainted by bloodguilt and muddy mire?

Though our names are tainted with forgetfulness: forgetting his faithfulness and forgetting our faithlessness, he made a promise. And God does not forget his promises.

God took to himself human flesh and lived among us. He did not forget the word of God, but lived the word of God. In perfect memory of the

Father's faithfulness, he denied the words of the serpent and remembered God's word. He remembered the Father's faithfulness to care for the least of these. He was repaid with persecution and betrayal, but in the Garden, he did not forget the Father's faithfulness.

And after living in perfect memory of the Father, he took our forgetful, human flesh and he marched it to the forsaken tree that we who were faithless might not be forgotten.

The Path to Paradise

Luke 23 depicts Jesus, the Son, having been tried and sentenced. He has been given the wooden beam, and foreigners have marched alongside him. But there are others there too. There are women there, following him and weeping (Lk. 23:27ff.)

The words of Jesus are shocking and offensive. As he turns to the women following and weeping, he tells them, "Do not weep for me. Instead weep for yourselves and your children." The day is coming he tells them, when the tree will be dry, perhaps referring to the day of judgment, when people will beg the mountains and hills to crush and cover them, to hide them from the judgment coming upon the earth. "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves." In so doing, Jesus reminds us that he goes willingly because he follows the word of the Father in the power of the Spirit.

And going along with him were two others. Others of a different kind. These were evil doers, and though Jesus was sentenced, they could hardly be considered similar. The ones who went alongside him were not righteous or faithful. They were unrighteous and faithless. These are the ones who rebel against God and man and are receiving their just punishment.

And when they reach the skull place they crucify him. It is remarkable that Luke's depiction is bloodless. This is a crucifixion, there is no doubt, but the text only uses one matter-of-fact way of stating it: "There they crucified him." There is no spear in the side, there is no crown of thorns, there is no whip, and there is no blood. The pure and spotless lamb of God is maligned and mocked, but the cross is his throne. Outside of the city, in the wilderness country, the blameless lamb was laden down with curses (Lev. 16:21). Jesus surely is the Passover lamb, and he surely is the burnt bull; but here in Luke 23, Jesus is the Azazel Goat. He is not depicted as the slaughtered one. He is shown as the pure one who bears away the sins of the people; damns them in the desert, sinks them in the sea. God has no

problem with memory, he forgets only what he chooses to, and he chooses to forget our sin.

Though all others seemed to forget his righteousness, he did not forget why he had come to the earth.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

He came as a perfect priest to intercede for the people and bring purification. He came as the spotless lamb to receive the confession and transgression of the people and to take it far into the wilderness. As the Scapegoat, Jesus came to bear away the sin... even the sin that the people *do not know what they do*.

Did you know that God made provision for sins of ignorance? There are things we have forgotten we had done, but God provided a way for Israel to trust that God has absolved forgotten sin. When Jesus climbs upon the cross, with evildoers on his left and his right, he stretches out his hands and says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

They have forgotten! They do not even know the things they have done. They do not even know the things they have not done. They do not even know the things God has done that they have failed to notice. For all the forgotten sins, Jesus prays, “Forgive them.” It is vain to serve God, we think, because he has forgotten us and he has let the wicked escape; but

God remembers us even when we forget.

Those standing there watched while Jesus was the purifying priest, praying for all around him, the encampment watched. As the perfect lamb, he received their transgressions.

The rulers cast lots and called him the chosen one at the same time that they scoffed: Let him save himself!

Oh, but Jesus is the chosen one, the anointed priest who would serve the people.

The soldiers brought wine and called him the King of the Jews at the same time that they mocked him: save yourself!

Oh, but Jesus *is* the King of the Jews, exalted upon the cross, his throne, and there is even the inscription written above him, telling the whole world that *he is the king*.

The evildoer called upon Christ for salvation at the same time as he blasphemed him: save yourself and us!

Oh, but Jesus *is* saving them, though he himself did not need salvation. He is the savior of all who look to him.

But the other evildoer knew Jesus' righteousness. Through the Holy Spirit's light shining into his heart, he saw the faithfulness of Jesus. So he asked... not that he would remember Jesus, but that Jesus would remember him. He honored him as the Covenant Keeper when he asked, "Remember me." The other one blasphemed Jesus, but not both. One of them saw Jesus and asked why he was doing nothing to save them. But the other rebuked him and remembered the just judgment of God. He remembered the faithfulness of the Covenant-keeper. He remembered the faithlessness of his own transgressions. And instead of asking Jesus to prove himself, he trusted him to be everything. "Remember me," he asked, and the goat that would bear the sin into the place of forgetfulness promised that he would remember him indeed.

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus promised to remember him, but not as a distant, historical fact. As a spouse can remember their wedding day, Jesus remembers us always. Paradise, a return to the garden, is something that is future in scope, but it is not only future just as it is not only past. It is something that takes place every day and every week. Though we forget, we are not forgotten.

Jesus carried our sin to the wilderness to be forever forgotten, but he promises to remember us always. And he does so through his Holy Spirit. His Spirit dwells with us and brings to us the favor of the Father. The Holy Spirit brings us into the living memory of God's faithfulness. He causes us to remember God's goodness, and he teaches us what is in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Forgetting is painful. But it is most painful when we forget the things we ought to remember and remember the things we ought to forget.

Do not fear... for even when we forget, we are not forgotten.

Emmanuel Boston is an Applied Theology graduate of California Baptist University and an M.Div candidate at Beeson Divinity School (Birmingham, AL). He regularly fills the pulpit of churches in need, and explores storytelling through narrative role-playing games. His beautiful wife Ruthie has been a faithful encouragement, and his two sons remind him of the need to proclaim God's grace and truth to all humanity. Though he has delivered conference papers in theology and written informally, he is glad to have *Solum* become the home of his first published work.”



VISUAL ART

MAURA J. HARRISON



Harrison, *Inferno-Canto 05*, 2022. Digital collage.



Harrison, *Purgatory-Canto 24*, 2022. Digital collage.



Harrison, *Paradise-Canto 16*, 2022. Digital collage.

Maura J. Harrison is a photographer, graphic designer, and poet. She is currently a student in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. She lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

MATTHEW ROBINSON



Matthew Robinson, *Honeymoon Swim*, 2022. Digital photograph.

Matthew Robinson is Professor of Justice Studies at Appalachian State University. He takes pictures for fun when traveling the globe with his wife Briana.