THE MERCY ISSUE

THE Mockingbird

No. 23

COSMIC MERCY IN A CRAZY UNIVERSE | A FUGITIVE COMES HOME
PRODIGAL GRACE | THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS | MERCY AT THE MOVIES

“Nothing can make
injustice just but mercy.”

— Robert Frost

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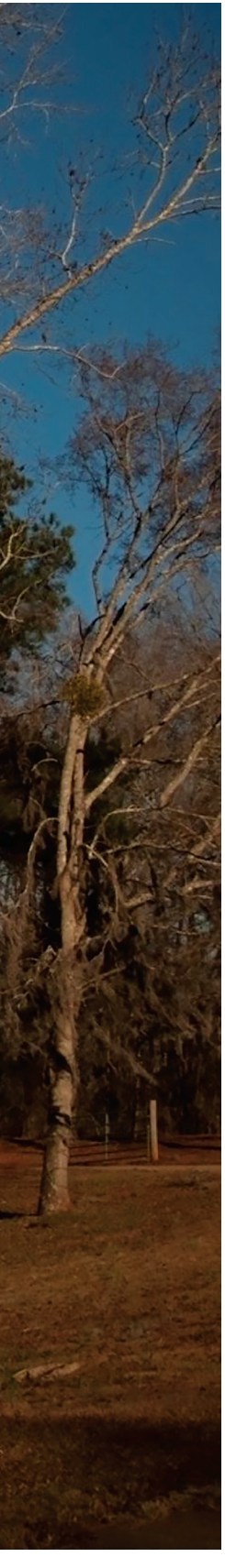
Jessica Hines, *Southern Stories #4*, from the Southern Stories series. © Jessica Hines.



THE Mockingbird

Summer 2023

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The Mockingbird is a nonprofit magazine that seeks to connect the message of God's grace with the concerns of everyday life. Our staff believes that grace, by its nature, is dynamic, unmerited, and expansive; we hope the range of voices in this issue reflects that nature. In surprising and down-to-earth ways, we aim to demonstrate how the Christian understanding of reality—what people are like, what God is like, and how the two intersect—is borne out all around us. For more, visit our website, **www.mbird.com.**

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Cover: Ernesto Rancaño, *El perdón / Forgiveness*, 2017. Methacrylate, metal and feathers, 16 1/2 × 7 9/10 × 19 7/10 in.

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Richard Misrach, *Holy Rosary Cemetery and Union Carbide Complex*, Taft, Louisiana, 1998. © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Off the Hook

Mercy seems soft in a hard world—that is, until you need it. When just deserts are yours to be served, mercy tastes unbelievably good, like freedom, relief, a fresh start. But if you haven't experienced it for yourself, the whole thing can seem a little airy, an idealistic concept whose meaning proves elusive. What is this thing we call mercy? In the words of journalist Elizabeth Bruenig, "Mercy is when you have the right to exact some sort of penalty or punishment … and you elect to do less than you could or nothing at all."

It was only after we had begun working on this issue that we realized the real trouble with it: how offensive mercy can appear to those on the outside; how, when it seems least appropriate, it may be most urgently needed. In such instances it can seem dangerous. To let an offender "off the hook" could mean giving them the freedom to once again do the very thing they're being pardoned for. But as these pages prove, very often mercy has the opposite effect. It inspires gratitude, awe, a deeper faith in love; it inspires security and freedom to be creative. As the musician Nick Cave once wrote, "Mercy ultimately acknowledges that we are all imperfect and in doing so allows us the oxygen to breathe—to feel protected within a society, through our mutual fallibility." In her book *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, Anne Lamott suggests that the musculature of mercy is what holds up the skeleton of our humanity: "Mercy is radical kindness.

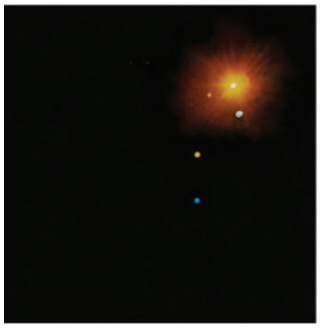
Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable."

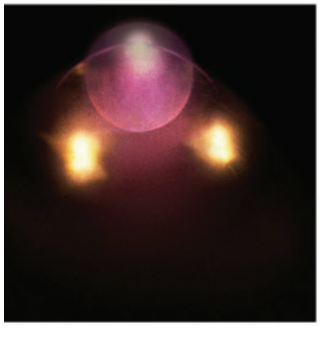
Of course, we are most likely to extend mercy to others once we have been recipients of it ourselves. Thus we turn to one of the great grounding principles of the Christian faith: that God is "gracious and merciful," or, as the classic hymn by Frederick William Faber professes, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." In a moving photograph by Jessica Hines featured early in these pages, a hand-painted road sign puts it directly: "GOD IS NOT MAD AT YOU NO MATTER WHAT!"

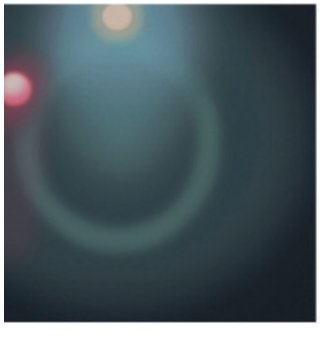
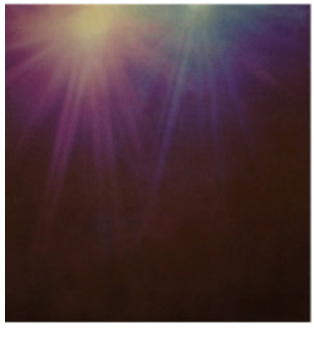
In this issue, we push that claim and find it has no limits, bringing you stories of mercy, both vertical and horizontal, major and mundane. The scholar Kendall Cox offers a close read of the Prodigal Son parable, and author Francis Spufford makes the case that the existence of *everything* is mercy. Dianne Collard writes of how, after a radical act of forgiveness, she worked to have her son's killer released from prison. Katelyn Beaty writes about mercy in the internet age, especially for oneself, while Kelsey Marden sheds light on the faith motivating workers from the International Rescue Committee. Other essays teach us about the quality of mercy from Shakespeare, *Moby Dick*, and of course, Mr. Miyagi. We have some percipient interviews, too: with *New York Times* contributing opinion writer, Esau McCaulley; author Alex Mar, about her book *Seventy Times Seven*; and Robert Leon Davis, who was a cop turned fugitive of the law for more than twenty years before a powerful conversion brought him home. And that's not all. We hope that somewhere in these pages you find for yourself that feeling of being off the hook. That you enjoy your just deserts, because they are sweet.

— The Editors

Spot illustrations by Avery Reed.




Dario Robleto, *Will The Sun Remember At All*, 2011. Suite of 9 archival digital prints on Epson Somerset Velvet 255gsm paper.

By Francis Spufford

Through Him All Things Were Made

Mercy in John Chapter One

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–14 NRSVUE)

We tend (I tend) to hear the opening words of John's gospel as a glorious zoom shot. It begins with the universe and ends with the local and immediate, rather like the opening of Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), which starts with the whole cosmos ("Big, isn't it?" says an urbane voiceover) and ends with a British bomber limping home in flames with David Niven at the controls.

Only here, we start with the creation, grandly recapitulating the beginning of absolutely everything in the Genesis story; *seem* to touch down beside the Jordan at "There was a man sent from God whose name was John" but prove to be only mid-zoom; and truly arrive on the ground with "And the word became flesh and lived among us… full of grace and truth." After the immensities and abstractions, we land at the ordinary earth, in tight focus. We're looking at one man by a river, and another man coming up to him—and from there the whole sto-

ry follows that second man, concentrating on faces and hands, and fish, and conversation, and shouting, and dry roads through the hills, and town walls, and eventually bread and wine, and blood, and flies buzzing around a corpse, and an opened tomb, and a woman's face made radiant with astonishment. Not on the cosmos; not on aeons, and parsecs, and whatever exactly might have been meant by *Logos* in Greek.

And that's a good use of the first chapter of John—a good way of hearing it, a good way to have it set us up for the story that follows. That human-scaled, ground-level story is, after all, for Christians, *the* story that matters, the one that defines the nature of the world. For us the universe is made by narrative at least as much as it's made by physics. But it's not the only way of hearing John 1, and there are other things to notice in it.

In the midst of the zoom into the incarnation, it matters, yes, that Christ was involved somehow in the creation of the world, because that's what lets the writer register the necessary irony of the world rejecting him. 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him: yet the world did not know him.' But for those purposes it doesn't really matter *how* St. John's gospel is saying that such a thing happened. If you're anything like me, then for simplicity's sake the point being made shakes down in your head something like this: God made the world, Christ is God, therefore when Christ entered the world, God did, so of course you could say that the maker was entering what had been made. Again, good enough to support where the gospel is going, and we don't let it detain us.

But let's let it detain us now, because the gospel is actually asserting something here that isn't in that executive summary. *And without him not one thing came into being.* John 1 isn't just suggesting that, in a general way, God is the creator and Jesus equals God. It's saying, specifically and precisely, that Christ in his own person *as* Christ was integral to the creation; that Christ was integral to the reason why there is something rather than nothing, that the universe exists at all.

It's a contention that makes it into the Nicene creed: *through him all things were made*. It's a contention that, for many centuries, Christians made sense of in terms of the sacred legend of creation offered by the Genesis story. Now, it's a contention that comes to us in the context of a universe 13.8 billion years old and about 93 billion light years across, where even locally, even just in our own solar system, our tally of the things that were made turns out to need to include not just a few well-warmed and well-lighted familiar planets, close in around the lantern of the sun, but a hundred thousand plus dim chunks of planetary rubble out in the Kuiper belt, and beyond this the conjectural billion or so comet nuclei of the Oort Cloud, balls of frozen gas as big as mountains, turning silently in the great dark. Or, going small rather than large, to include within every one of the billions of cells of complex organisms like us every protein coded for by every codon of every genome. Or, staying local but looking along the axis of time rather than space, the "everything that was made" has to include all the past moments in which the spot this church stands on was red-hot magma; and when it was the floor of a sunlit shallow sea; and when it was the windy shoulder of a mountain range. Or looking forward, it has to take in

all the things this place will ever be before the sun becomes a red giant in five billion years or so, and burns the Earth to cinders. All this; all these things at every scale; all these things past, present and to come; all these things visible and invisible, witnessed by human eyes and human minds or existing as yet unsuspected by us. Everything. Big, isn't it?

And the claim of John chapter one, and of the Creed, is that this inconceivable totality of stuff has somehow been brought into being because of…Jesus. Well, because of what Christianity insists Jesus is, as well as him being the historically documented travelling rabbi in first-century Palestine. We don't just say that He was a good man, or an inspiring deliverer of life lessons, or even a virtuous prophet of the one God. We say, following John 1, that he is God's language. *In the beginning was the Word*. We say that, although our own words are bitten-off bursts of breath, pushed cunningly out through the soft flaps of our larynxes as sounds that carry meaning, *this* was a kind of speaking by God that *was* God, that continued to have the whole active fullness of God's power and love in it, as it was uttered out. By this speech, says Christianity, the universe was created—by this uttering of Christ the Word, into the nothing before there was anything.

Wait a minute, I thought when I first thought about this. Whoa; hold on. Isn't this one of those embarrassing moments when Christianity, as the successor religion, tries to shoe-horn itself retrospectively into Judaism? *Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha-aretz*—"in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," says the first line of the Hebrew Bible. *En arkhei en ho Logos*, "in the beginning was the *Word*," says John 1. Look! Out with the elbows; a bit of squeezing, a bit of shoving; excuse me, excuse me, coming through; and now we've made a space for Jesus. Now we've got our guy in there! Maybe. And also, I thought, what a surprisingly abstract way to begin, and especially to begin a story which, as we know, is going to be very palpable and down-to-earth shortly, and to proceed at foot-speed across the landscape of Galilee. To begin that, with a piece of speculative cosmology. To begin the story of God with us, God among us, God possessing a face like ours. With the idea that before Christ was one of us, he was—what? A kind of alphabetic principle, existing before the dawn of time. A kind of nucleus of information from which creation unfolded. Surprising.

But in fact there's a long philosophical tradition which conceives of the universe as matter animated by, activated by, some principle of order. John 1's *Logos* belongs in a family of ideas stretching back to Plato, and stretching forward, arguably, all the way to Hegel and Marx. In Hegel's dialectic, in Marx's dialectical materialism, what stops the world of matter being inert, un-progressive, merely buffeted to and fro by accident? Why, the presence in it of an active principle which draws the confusion and happenstance of human affairs into intelligible order. And, more recently, there's been an ever-increasing awareness in the sciences of the various roles played by information in natural processes. Hurricanes, dribbling taps, the distribution of different sizes of earthquake, all turn out to obey underlying informational rules. Evolution can be modelled as an algorithm. Thermodynamics can be thought of as a set of processes in which information is and is not conserved.

And life itself, or at least all life of which we are so far aware, proves to run on information, to be animated by the four-letter alphabet of DNA. A's, C's, G's, and T's write the code of life. Write the *book* of life, newspapers are prone to say, lifting a phrase from Revelation, when covering stories about gene-sequencing. They do it because this language-like basis of biology seems to put it irresistibly close to Christian scripture's script-based theory of creation, at least on the level of pleasing metaphor. When a friend of mine, writing a book about the sequencing of the *C. elegans* nematode, which came before the human genome project, went looking for a title, there it was waiting. *In the Beginning was the Worm.* Um, just in case anyone is confused, here—or Richard Dawkins turns out to be reading this—let me be clear that I do not think the existence of DNA proves the truth of the first chapter of John's gospel. Family resemblances, again; that's all I'm talking about. A surprising spread of ways in which, in different domains, the picture recurs of a universe ordered by speech-like or language-like principles.

The difference in what John 1 proposes is that here, in Christianity's picture of creation, what pulls the universe together, what comes breathing out from God to summon matter into being, is not any old order but specifically *Christ-like* order. And we know what Christ comes to do in the universe; the rest of the gospel tells us so. He comes to us to heal the broken-hearted, to deliver captives, to restore sight to the blind. To proclaim, and then to enact, *mercy*. Mercy is what he does; God's mercy is what he *is*.

So, if he is also the principle of order that writes creation, then what is written into creation, through and through, end to end, everywhere—is mercy. The logic of everything, the purpose of everything, the business of everything—is mercy. We do not often spell out to ourselves what this means, but perhaps we should. To Christians, the business of thunderstorms is mercy. The business of sand-dunes is mercy. The business of the birds in the hedgerows is mercy. The business of "the endless forms most beautiful" spun forth by evolution is, somehow, mercy. Out in the Oort Cloud, the business of a mountain of frozen methane faintly glimmering in the starlight, is mercy.

A strange kind of mercy, though. Life's beautiful forms are often ferocious. Blake was asking a real theological ques-

tion about the tiger, tiger, burning bright: "What immortal hand or eye / dare frame *thy* fearful symmetry?" Did the word of divine mercy really do the tiger's teeth? The order of the universe is one that appears to be thoroughly indifferent towards the good of creatures like us who can be struck by lightning, scratched by thorns in the hedgerows, infected by viruses. (Which are, yes, elegant in their way.)

Perhaps we need to look at this from further back. From out of the specific range of our immediate human interests. Perhaps we need to say that creation is merciful in the sense that there is anything rather than nothing in the first place. That given that there is something—that *that something* appears to be tuned towards producing complexity rather than just simplicity; that even though the thermodynamic rules of creation point one way ultimately, and one way only, down towards the dead level of heat death—in the meantime creation allows for a myriad of cunning little heat engines to support local exceptions to the rule. Among them, all living things. Among living things, us. Perhaps it is mercy that we bundles of water, carbon, and phosphorus, organized briefly into selves that last not much longer in the scheme of things than water organized into waves, nevertheless know ourselves to be present—and know each other, while we last, and know what it is to love and to make, and in that resemble in our temporary way the creator of all things.

Perhaps it is. That must be part of an answer we are not ever going to know the whole of. But it seems a cold comfort, and one—how can I put this?—better attuned to the abstract cosmology in the first words of John's gospel than it is to the human-sized story that follows. Thank heavens it moves from one to the other. Thank heavens Christian theology insists on both. For if the advantage of listening to John 1 away from the Christmas zoom to Bethlehem is that it makes us pay attention to Christ in creation, the gospel carries us swiftly all the same to a man beside the Jordan, "full of grace and truth."

If you think that mercy is too cold, too abstract, too incomplete as a principle shaping galaxies, then you may consider your viewpoint endorsed. God, it seems, agrees with you. Christ agrees with you. Mercy is not completed by the creation of the universe, the gospel tells us. Mercy is not complete, the gospel says, until Mercy himself, in person, enters into creation. Not as a principle. Not as an alphabet of underlying order. Not as a distant benevolence. But as one of us, as vulnerable as any of us to the sharpness of the tiger's teeth, to the brevity of existence, to the danger and indifference that seems inseparable from matter's beauty: and wearing the thorns of the hedgerow as a crown.

This essay was adapted from a sermon delivered February 2019 at St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford.

By Dianne B. Collard

When the Words Become True

The journey of my life to understand not only God's mercy for me, but how I was called to be merciful as well, began in the depths of indescribable pain. It began with a phone call late on a Sunday evening in Vienna, Austria, where my husband and I lived and worked as missionaries. I was watching television and doing some ironing. My husband and son were at their desks writing letters. When I answered the phone, a voice asked, "Are you Mrs. Collard, and do you have a son in Concord, California, named Timothy Scott Collard?" With growing anxiety, I answered, quietly, "Yes." The caller identified himself as a detective from a police department in California. He explained that my son had been "involved in an incident" during the night and that he would call me within thirty minutes to explain the situation. He requested the name, phone numbers, and addresses of our parents, who also lived in California, before he said good-bye and hung up.

Panic began to rise in me, and I called out to my husband and son. We immediately went to prayer, but we did not know how to pray. Had Tim committed a crime? Had he been in a car accident? Nearly three hours later, we still had not heard anything. We called the police department back and said, "We don't know where he is or what he's done. You have our son, and we want some information!" The operator asked us to hang up once again so that a detective could call us. Instead, the call came from our distraught daughter, Wendy, and her aunt.

Wendy had been alone at the house, where she lived with my parents while she attended university, when the local police came to tell her the terrible news. When she collapsed, they had called my sister-in-law who lived nearby. "Mom, Tim is dead," Wendy cried. "He was murdered!" That phone call from our daughter changed our lives forever. The journey had begun.

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Very little was known then, except that the murderer had been caught and had bragged to the police that he had not only murdered his own wife but had murdered "her lover" too. He was in error presuming

she and Tim were lovers, but the horrific, undeniable fact was this: Our precious eldest son was dead.

Tim had a weekend job in the concession stands at a local outdoor amphitheater. That Saturday evening a coworker, Donna, told him that she feared going home to her abusive husband. Since this was the last production of the season, the crew stayed for a tailgate party, but Tim had already gone on home. An hour later, however, he still could not get his coworker's situation off his mind and returned to find out if he could help her. By that time, she was the only one left in the parking lot except for the security guard. Donna was drunk and unable to drive. Tim told the security guard to continue with his duties and promised

Louise Lawler, *Grieving Mothers* (Attachment), 2005. Silver dye bleach print on museum box, 46 × 41 in. Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers.

he would either drive his coworker home or stay with her until she could drive. He sat in the passenger seat of her car with the door open, leaving his own car keys in his ignition. Within five minutes of the guard's departure, Donna recognized the pickup truck of her husband, Mike, entering the parking lot and, in a panic, turned on the ignition to speed away. In the resulting car chase, Donna's car was forced off the road. Mike then pulled his wife from the car, drove her home, and shot her multiple times on the front lawn of their home. He then returned to the amphitheater parking lot to wait for Tim, who was walking back from Donna's car. Mike locked Tim's car and threw the keys into the tall grass.

When Tim arrived back at his car, Mike was waiting for him there. We do not know exactly what occurred on that hillside, but it is suspected that Tim tried to reason with him—telling him the truth about the situation—and had turned to walk away from the scene. He was then brutally shot at least three times in the back of the head, his body mutilated. He died instantly.

In the meantime, police were looking for Mike to solve the attempted murder of his wife. When he was finally arrested, Mike exclaimed that he could solve a murder yet unknown to the police. That murder was of our son, Tim.

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Dazed and weeping, we left Vienna for the long trip to California. To our shock, the head of security and the director of the airline met us at the San Francisco airport. They whisked us into a private room, seeking to protect us from the media who had gathered to interview the missionary parents of the victim of this gruesome murder. Mike had assumed that Tim was sexually involved with his wife, and the early newspaper reports endorsed his version of events, calling it a sordid love triangle. This was repeated on TV and shared along with graphic pictures of my son's slain body. It was a nightmare.

Eventually the truth was revealed, and one reporter stated, "Tim was a friend with a listening ear—at the wrong place and wrong time." Of course, all murder is senseless, but the murder of my dear son was absolutely without any justification.

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The following months of grief—the waves of pain—were accompanied by perennial questions that demanded answers. Why did God allow this to happen? Where is the hope we need to go on living? Is God good? These were only some of the questions that punctuated my journey toward healing.

Today I can unequivocally declare, "Yes, God is good—even in the midst of a life that is unfair." I've surrendered the question of "Why?" to a new question: "God, what can you do to both glorify yourself and to heal others through this horrible situation?" Yet in those first weeks following Tim's death, when the despair of grief overwhelmed me, I knew that if I did not have God's care, compassion, and strength, I would not survive. I could not go on living. There was a stark realization that without God, I could not handle the grief.

And the one question that haunted me was, "Could God really expect me to forgive—to show mercy—to the murderer of my child?"

As a young girl, I had trusted in Christ as my Savior and knew that God had forgiven me, that I was completely accepted as a child of God and did not have to "earn" His love. I had learned of the depths of God's mercy as I read in the Scriptures about Christ, hanging on a cross, crying out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And I had experienced that mercy when I embraced His forgiveness for myself. I also knew that as God's child, my life could only be all God desired it to be. I firmly believed that all of God's commands were either to keep me from harm or to allow me to experience all that is best—but how could this be true of God's command to forgive my son's murderer? How could I forgive this man who had brutally taken my son and hurt my family so deeply?

God's expectation that I forgive my son's murderer seemed unfair and totally beyond my understanding.

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My stark, driving need of God at my weakest moment thrust me into the study of the Scriptures. How is God's forgiveness defined and demonstrated? Colossians 2:13–14 is clear: "For you were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. *He forgave all our sins*. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross."

Could this be the standard of forgiveness God expected of me for this murderer? Was this the reality of mercy that I was to express? I continued searching the Scriptures for God's intent, and it quickly became abundantly clear what His expectations were.

Here are some of the other verses that I found (emphasis mine):

> And so, as those who have been chosen by God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; *just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you*. (Colossians 3:12–13)

> And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving each other, just as God in Christ* has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

No room for questions or doubts here. God's forgiveness of me was complete, even though it was not deserved. As such, I could not plead ignorance or pick-and-choose the commands to obey.

But it is the free gift of God's forgiveness—His mercy—that lays upon us the willingness of a forgiving spirit for others. If we understand the depths of our guilt and our dependency upon the grace of God, naturally we will extend forgiveness to those who sin against us. To state it another way, my forgiveness of others is the proof that I myself have been forgiven. I could not, as God's child, choose to do anything but forgive.

But for me, the most powerful aspect of forgiveness was the realization that I must choose, by the power of the Holy Spirit, *to live with the consequences of another person's sin*. This is what Christ did for me on the cross. It is what God teaches me to do towards others. It is "forgiving as God, in

Christ, has forgiven me." This was the deep expression of mercy that is the characteristic of life in God's kingdom.

So, with a prayer that God would make me "willing," I chose to show mercy and to forgive the murderer of my child. It was not always easy, but God gave me the power to obey His command.

It began with me writing simple letters expressing my forgiveness and explaining that he could be completely forgiven by God also. Over time, God showed me how simple "acts of forgiveness" would bless this man, and would increase my freedom from anger and bitterness. I realized the murderer and I were both on a pilgrimage of mercy.

The initial "act of forgiveness" was to pray for my son's murderer *by name*. I had never uttered his name because he had become a *monster* in my mind. But when I started praying for Mike, he became a *man*, one whom God loved and for whom Christ died. Eventually, when this man responded to God's offer of mercy and forgiveness, this man became my *brother in Christ*.

We worked to have him released from prison. And, as impossible as it sounds, I can honestly say, I love the murderer of my child. This is only through the mercy and love of God.

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This journey, as difficult as it has been, has taught me so much. I truly wonder if I could have ever understood and delighted in God's mercy for me without experiencing what it took for me to forgive the killer of my child. I am far more aware of the cost of God's forgiveness and His love for me now that I have learned to express mercy and, as a result, have been blessed with love, grace, and freedom. It was not a lesson I would have chosen, but I am so grateful for what God has taught me.

My first exposure to a Shakespeare play was as a fourteen-year-old freshman in high school. It was *The Merchant of Venice*. I've never forgotten Portia's statement, "The quality of mercy is not strained." "Strained" is an Old English word for "constrained" or "forced." Mercy has to be freely given; no one can force someone to be merciful. This is true of God's mercy towards us. It is freely given; and that was true when I chose to forgive the murderer of my child.

As I was writing these thoughts, I heard a song written by Bill Gaither and sung by the Gaither Vocal Band. The song title is "Something to Say." The chorus begins with words that sum up what my experience has been: "But you've never lived until the words become true; until forgiveness and mercy mean something to you."

I think that says it all. Forgiveness and mercy now mean something to me. I have lived. Thanks be to God.

Dear Gracie...

Good Advice for When Good Advice Has Failed You

By **Sarah Condon**

Dear Gracie,

During COVID, the church I was attending shut down, and I cannot for the life of me find a good replacement. The best I've found has great amenities and nice people, but the preaching is shockingly bad. (Overheard from the pulpit: "There are many truths"; and on Easter: "I *think* I believe in the resurrection.") It depresses me to go every week just to question my faith. I'm ready to quit church entirely. What to do?

Signed,
Church Shopper

Dear Church Shopper,

For nine decades my grandmother attended whatever First Baptist church existed in her geographical area. I have no doubt that the first seventy years were filled with decent preaching and Bible study. But I know those last two decades were hard on her. As a woman with a master's degree in education who read and studied the Bible repeatedly, she was often being preached to by someone who had hardly finished high school. I remember attending a service once with her where the preacher described a potential afterlife by saying, "I don't know how hot Hell is, but I burned my finger once. And it hurt."

For my grandmother, it was the people—the congregation—that kept her there. They were people she suffered alongside, to whom she brought casseroles, and talked about how the crops were going to do that summer. So, with that in mind, find a church without any amenities. But make sure you like the people, and then dig deep to know them better. I suggest a small congregation with a part time pastor who may or may not have attended an accredited seminary.

And then do what my grandmother did when the preaching is really terrible. A woman of a certain age, she would simply turn off her much-needed hearing aids for the sermon portion of the service and meditate on the love of Jesus.

If you are not blessed by deafness, remember that the Lord gave us earbuds for a reason.

Signed,
Gracie

Dear Gracie,

I've been a teacher for 23 years, and in that time I've had to deal with any number of issues. But this year, 11 of my 127 students (that I know of) wrote final essays with A.I., and I'm about ready to throw in the towel. I have long felt inept online, but this new technology has me totally disoriented. I worry for my students' futures. How should a person manage the overwhelm of new technology like this?

Signed,
Internet Incompetent

Dear I.I.,

First, God bless you in all of your giftedness as an educator. Please do not give up.

Second, I am terrified too.

There is a staggering (and frightening) number of things that technology can do. It can read and write for us for sure, and these days it is getting closer and closer to being *us* for us.

But there is so much beauty in the things technology would try to streamline: awkwardness in personal conversation, the way a stranger makes eye contact with us when we say "excuse me" to one another, and even just the sheer gift that it is to be in a body that faces birth to death in an ever-increasing march.

Can you remind them of this? Can you get them to lay on the floor with one hand on their belly and one hand on their heart? Can they speak tenderly to themselves and hold the preciousness of all of that is possible alongside the way that new crayons smelled on the first day of school?

And please take this last part with full knowledge that I am a minister and not an educator, so I likely have no idea what I am talking about:

Is there a chance that you are doing more than just teaching them? In this moment when isolation and depression are at an all-time high (and A.I. is certainly not helping nor is it going anywhere), your work is more important than ever. To sit in a classroom with a community of peers, talking and moving around each other, is beyond anything they could learn. You are providing an anecdote for loneliness. And we need you to keep doing it.

Signed,
Gracie

Dear Gracie,

This year my oldest sister has suffered setback after setback: divorce, job loss, several serious health scares, and ongoing uncertainty about her housing. To say that I feel sympathy for her would be an understatement, but I feel as powerless as she does to change her circumstances. Other than offering a helping hand, how can I wait well with her in this season? For most of our lives I've looked to her for guidance and direction, and this unexpected role reversal has left me feeling out of my depth.

Signed,
Her Little Sis

Dear Little Sis,

On the subject of birth order, I recently read, "Either you are an oldest daughter or you can ask for help." Typically, she is the one who does at least some of the parenting, half of the cooking, and more cleaning than the other siblings combined. Which means, in effect, we shape these first-born girls to suffer alone. As a (too) proud member of that female institution, I want to offer you this: Tell your sister that you see her, that you really see her, and that she is not suffering alone. Tell her that there is no valor in denying when things suck. And then sit with her in that hardship.

Pray that God would give you the strength to reverse your roles for a season. I know she has seemed like she has always had it together. She probably did most things before you, and you stood in the shadow of her doing them well. But even then, she needed you. And she definitely needs you now. You are getting the chance to do something rare, something that your younger self likely never imagined: You are to care for someone who seemingly never needed it.

That is holy work. It is the most Christ-like calling to serve at the feet of people who have always worn a mask of not needing anything from anyone.

Signed,
Gracie

Have a question for Gracie?

Email **magazine@mbird.com**.
All queries will be kept anonymous.

By Kendall Cox

Prodigal Grace

It was after reading J. D. Salinger's short stories *Franny and Zooey* in college that I took up praying the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*.

Weary of the image-conscious posturing of collegiate life, Franny clings to the prayer like some kind of antidote. "I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's," she laments. "I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere… I'm so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values… I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody." Franny explains the Jesus Prayer to her boyfriend: "If you keep saying that prayer over and over again—you only have to just do it with your *lips* at first—then eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self-active. Something *happens* after a while. I don't know what, but something happens, and the words get synchronized with the person's heartbeats, and then you're actually praying without ceasing." What's remarkable to Franny about the prayer is that "when you first start doing it, you don't even have to have *faith* in what you're doing… All you have in the beginning is quantity. Then, later on, it becomes quality by itself." Her boyfriend tells her to "take it easy" but follows with a question about what exactly *is* supposed to happen. "You get to see God," Franny replies.

I didn't expect all that, but the mantra did weave itself into the rhythm of my breathing when there was nothing else to think or hear. After many years on obsessive repeat when I woke in the night, the final phrase morphed into *have mercy on me, a poor child*. This revision was prompted by the spiritual direction of Julian of Norwich and her *Revelations of Divine Love*. As I soundlessly mouthed "child" instead of "sinner," I could hear the Calvinist patriarchs of my youth reproach me: See, theology goes soft when you let women in. And I would have to tamp it down with Franny's retort: Oh, don't be so "hopelessly super-male."

Julian's portrayal of us as injured children challenges the idea that God demands we make ourselves low in the face of grace. She indicts this as "sin's story about itself" and asks us: Is it God's story about us?[1] Julian spends years scanning the scriptures for an answer and ends up appealing to a distinction between human judgment and divine judgment, saying the former is "harsh and painful" while the latter is "kind and lovely." Where the human view is mixed and accusing, the divine is unadulterated "mercy and pity." But how can God see us as blameless

1. This is Denys Turner's wonderful phrase for Julian's indictment of her predecessors and contemporaries for stressing "wrath" as an essential feature of God's justice and the work of the atonement. Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 99.

and holy (Col. 1:22), she wonders, when we are in fact "sinners"?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son presses a similar question and points to an answer we often miss in the usual readings. If you're unfamiliar with the passage, or want to bring it more clearly to mind, please take a moment with what one commentator calls "the greatest short story ever told":

> *Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy*

Romare Bearden, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1967. Mixed media and collage on canvas, 50 x 60 in. Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15:11–32 NRSVUE)

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A family friend recently died after a long period in hospice. Knowing the end was close, I was sure to text him on his birthday. He texted back that my dad had brought him a copy of my book *Prodigal Christ,* and he had been reading it. Embarrassed by such an honor, I said something self-deprecating about how he should find a better way to spend the time that remained. He replied, "I want to tell you some day why I identify with the prodigal son."

My friend is far from alone in identifying with the Prodigal Son—there may not be a better story to conjure in the face of that final homecoming. The impetuous boy is a widely referenced figure for fallen humanity. Many writers take him as a template for their faith journey, especially their conversion story. St. Augustine was the first to cast himself as Luke's prodigal in his *Confessions,* and there have been countless representations in history, art, and literature since. From Rembrandt to Rodin to Toni Morrison, artists and authors commonly sympathize with the prodigal's story. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, it is as if this parable calls to us to "Come on, stand here on our side, on the side of human beings."

We are asked to see ourselves reflected in this child who is entitled, ungrateful, and careless, who squanders everything, and yet is received back with an unconditional love that says defiantly, "I will match you." This is grace. This is a powerful story of divine grace. That's why it has been called "the Gospel within the Gospel." It is the whole of creation-fall-redemption history condensed down into one compact yet capacious narrative that is moving and memorable.

But something wonderful about parable as a literary genre is that its meaning can't be exhausted by a first blush reading or reduced to a single message. It's packed with elisions that evoke questions. We have to make leaps and reread and talk about it. Why does the son leave? Why does the father give him his inheritance early? (Surely he knows that will be bad for him.) Where is the elder brother when this happens? Does he concur? How long is the younger son away and have they had any word from him? Where's the mother? Where are the women? (My daughter asked me this when, aghast, she saw me making a slide show featuring artworks populated only by fathers and sons. Rembrandt apparently had the same question and, in his famous rendering of the scene, painted women in.)

The parable is as fecund as it is elliptical, engaging our imaginations generatively. We are drawn into the family triangle, aligning ourselves with specific figures, perhaps at different times in our life, as Henri Nouwen does so candidly in his reflection on Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Over the millennia, biblical scholars have advanced countless interpretations, filling in the blanks and extrapolating from the details. Well-known in English as "the parable of the *prodigal* son," translations in other languages often use the epithet "the parable of the *lost* son," which leads us in a rather different direction. Readers have proposed a variety of other titles as well, such as "the parable of the good father," "the parable of the prodigal father," "the parable of the powerless almighty father," "the parable of the rebellious sons," and so on. This is indicative of the rich polyvalence of the text.

Of all there is to say, two specific features are worth noticing if we're going to understand the depth of Jesus' teaching. First, while most interpretations of the parable have stressed the difference between the two sons, their root problem is the same. (This has become a popular claim in more recent years, prompting some to rename it "the parable of the prodigal sons.") Second, in telling this story, Jesus is implicitly aligning himself with the wayward son.

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A few examples of the way the figures are usually contrasted helps clear the ground to see their similarity. In the long history of the parable's interpretation, the elder brother and younger son have been pitted against one another respectively as: righteous/sinner, Jew/Gentile, observant/unobservant (religiously speaking), proud/humble, unrepentant/repentant, law/gospel, judgement/grace, and—worst of all—reprobate/elect. These are all mapped onto the two sets of hearers identified in the preface (Luke 15:1–2): "Now all the *tax collectors and sinners* were coming near to listen to him. And *the Pharisees and the scribes* were grumbling…"

Something we're less likely to pick up on as modern readers is that this is a story about the classical virtue of liberality. Liberality or openhandedness is the midpoint between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. The reckless spendthrift is too free, too loose and liberal; the eldest child is too careful, too tightfisted. The father strikes the balance in his freehandedness. Like most of Jesus' parables, there's an economic thread to pull here.

There's coherence to all of these pairings. I draw attention to them mainly because

I think we are inclined to focus on characters and the way they remind us of ourselves or people in our lives. When I teach this parable in the classroom, I begin by having us locate ourselves. Unsurprisingly, this usually happens vis-à-vis our family of origin. Do you identify with the prodigal son? If so, you are in the excellent company of theologians and artists from across the ages. Are you the elder brother? Although no one *wants* to sympathize with a character whose bitterness threatens the story's happy ending—ironically putting us, as readers, precisely in his shoes—he has reasonable motivations and genuine anxieties. What about the father? It feels self-aggrandizing to see ourselves in a role we've been conditioned to read as God's, but we've all been in positions where we've readily released the past and rejoiced at restoration.

It's a good habit to take a look at the associations and biases perduring in our reading, because sometimes these can obscure the fullness of the message. As modern readers, we can be pretty character-driven and self-referential. It's worth remembering that in Jewish or Rabbinic parables of the sort Jesus tells, the meaning is supplied less by the lineup of stock characters and more by the rhetoric, by the verbal structure of the story, and especially by what is unexpected in the dialogue. We need to approach ancient parables a little more like we would prose poetry today. Word choice matters. Repetition matters a lot. Direct speech is telltale.

With this in mind, it's easier to notice that the sons are two sides of the same coin. The storyteller is indeed drawing a contrast. But it is less between the two sons, and more between the sons and their father, between the way both sons see themselves and the way the father sees each of them.

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The mischief commences with the young-er son's demand, "Father, give me my portion..." (v. 12). Give me! Disrespectful in any culture, and intensely so in the world of Jesus' first listeners, this is an insult to his whole family and to the land that is their shared livelihood. However, just as importantly, the boy's demand tells us something about how he sees himself. It reflects a sense of subjection. Although he's a figure of prodigality, his request is in fact meager, not excessive but deficient. He's taking whatever he can get in a fire sale, which is certainly less than his full inheritance (v. 13). (This complicates and inverts standard illustrations of the vices of prodigality and miserliness.) The son demeans himself further by going into a "distant" land, which is to say, a Gentile

country, where he can't keep the law, can't maintain purity. He breaks ties to family and community, burning his safety net, making his life precarious.

He hits rock bottom when hardship forces him to become another man's indentured servant. We find him tending a herd of pigs, so hungry he envies their slop (v. 15). This is a picture of poverty and loss recognizable to any reader. But his situation is, again, more heavily freighted with meaning for a first century Jewish audience. It is emblematic of humiliation, captivity and exile, ritual impurity, alienation from the people of God and therefore from God.

The narrative pivots when the wayward son "comes to himself" (v. 17) and regrets his circumstances. Often we read this as a conversion moment, a sign of repentance. But if we stay close to "the way the words go," they lead us in another direction as well. Why does he resolve to head home? His speech reveals that it's because he realizes it's ridiculous to let himself starve when he knows a man as patently generous as his own father. Even the least secure of his father's workers (the "hired hands") have plenty. The boy does not return in search of reconciliation or restoration. Instead, he prepares to admit, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," and to implore his father to "treat me like one of your hired hands" (v. 19). He takes for granted that he has been disowned. He conceives of his father's good favor as something earned and, in his case, now spent, "devoured" (v. 30).

The boy's rehearsed speech almost echoes the tax collector's prayer later in Luke 18:9–14, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," the origin of what becomes the Jesus Prayer. The difference is, he does not approach his father with humble faith in his mercy. He only seeks the opportunity to work off what little he might reasonably be said to deserve—to survive another day.

Now, his older brother seems to have taken an altogether different path, right? He stayed home. He's faithful, responsible, and hard-working. He hasn't jeopardized the whole future of the family. We overlook how fundamentally good all of this is when we summarily dismiss him for being slow to rejoice that the wolf has been readmitted to the sheepfold without any assurance of safety. Yet there are two clear textual signals that the older shares his younger brother's problem.

First, we find both boys *afield,* literally. The storyteller situates each of them working in a field. The younger is sent into the field ("εἰς τοὺς ἀγροὺς") to tend a herd (v. 15) and, ten verses later, the elder son comes up out of the field ("ἐν ἀγρῷ") after a day's work (v. 25). The repetition of *agrós* (Gk., "field") stresses their shared location. This becomes more explicit in the direct speech that follows on the geographical clue.

Second, their self-perception is *servile*. Just as the younger son sees himself as, at best, "a hired hand" (μισθίων) of the father (v. 19), the older son tells his father: "I've been slaving (δουλεύω) for you" (v. 29). With artful symmetry the two sons mirror one another. The younger son believes he deserves nothing now, while the older son has spent his whole life trying to deserve what is already his. They view themselves in servile terms, trafficking in an economy of "just deserts," a sort of familial meritocracy. They can't get outside a conceptuality of contingent worth, of rewards and punishments.

So while these children may have different behavioral problems on the face of it, their root cause is the same. The real contrast of the story arises with the father figure. The father does not see his sons as earn-

ers, as workers or servants. He treats both as free and legal equals, as masters of the household, no less than himself. He gives his younger son all he asks for (v. 12), and when he returns, gives again. The father "has compassion on" him (v. 20). This is the central verb on which the story turns, and there's a whole sermon in it for another time.[2] A visceral love prompts the father to have mercy, to bypass the usual process of forgiveness and restoration, immediately reinstating him as heir. This is the meaning of the father's orders, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one…put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet" (v. 22). These objects and gestures are symbolic of ownership or heirship.

According to the law, the firstborn son is designated to inherit two-thirds of the property (Dt. 21:17). But in the parable, it's the younger son who is going to wind up with a "double portion." (This of course alludes to the long and comical history of younger sons hijacking family inheritance, e.g., Jacob and Esau.) Because of this, people sometimes interpret the elder brother as the reprobate or rejected one. He seems to see himself this way, whining woundedly that "you never gave me!" (v. 29), which echoes his brother's "give me!" But there is no sign that the father disowns him. In fact, when the boy accuses him, the father speaks just as tenderly to him as to his youngest: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." What is translated "son" in this instance is τέκνον, a term of endearment or affectionate address. Where the ordinary Greek word for "son" (υἱός) is used elsewhere in the parable, here the father appeals to his eldest gently, inviting him in too, as if to say: Dear boy, neither did you have to earn my goodwill.

Over against the servility of his sons, the father says to them both, "what is mine is yours." What's going on with all this ownership language? Why is the father at such pains to stress that they are sons, not slaves? Of course, we balk at words like servant and slave today. But these make a certain point for the audience in the world of this story. To say "son," to say "child," is to say "heir." An heir is the recipient of a gift, a *free* gift. "Double portion" or "inheritance" is a common scriptural metaphor for salvation. In the language of Galatians 4:7, "You are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God."

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How do we become heirs? This brings us back to the main message of the parable. We said: This is grace, this is a story about God's grace. But what is grace? Grace is not just something that God *does*, an activity tangential to who God is. Grace has a name. Jesus is saying: I am the one in whom this happens. *I* am Grace.

We run into a slight textual problem here though. *Where* is Jesus in the parable? If Jesus were asked to identify with a character, what would he say? Commentators from Ambrose and Augustine on have sought him in little details: the fatted calf, the right hand of the father, the father's

2. There is much commentary on this word ἐσπλαγχνίσθη from σπλαγχνίζομαι. It is typically translated: to have compassion or pity, to experience deep love. But its literal meaning is more visceral: to be moved in one's intestines or gut. "Pity" (used throughout Julian's text) and "compassion" (a pivotal term in the biblical parable) have Latin roots that are nearly synonymous and have a strong connection with motherhood in Hebrew ("raham"/compassion is of the same set of consonants as "rahem"/womb).

embrace. Others have suggested Jesus is performing a better version of the elder brother. But according to the great twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth, Jesus Christ is not hidden in the margins. He is the main character. He is given "in, with, and under" the lost son.

How could that be? Isn't Jesus always the good guy in stories? This is a common mistake in reading parables—drawing correspondences that are too straightforward. Christ bears no simple identity with the younger son. It is a matter of the way their narrative arcs align. Barth says, "In the going out and coming in of the lost son in his relationship with the father we have a most illuminating parallel to the way trodden by Jesus Christ in the work of atonement, to his humiliation and exaltation" (*Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 23). That's a wild conclusion. In millennia of remarkably prolific freeplay with this story, no one before Barth saw this—except for the 14th century English anchorite, Julian of Norwich.[3]

According to both Julian and Barth, if this parable is genuinely "the gospel within the gospel," we must recognize that the storyteller is identifying himself with the fallen and wayward son. There are several strong indications that he is doing this. First, the repetition of the words "lost and found" ensures the parables of Luke 15 are taken as a set: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy. The triple parables are situated as a reply to the accusation in the preface that, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (v. 2). Jesus is justifying his lived fellowship with prodigals to their responsible elder brothers.

3. See Julian's "Example of the Lord and Servant" in Chapter 51 of the Long Text in her *Revelations of Divine Love*.

This is something else that can slip past our contemporary imaginations. Why is it such a big deal that Jesus is hanging out with "sinners"? We're so conditioned now by an equalizing account of sin and grace that it's harder for us to register the clear dividing line—in/out, righteous/unrighteous, clean/sinner. But the devout who are questioning Jesus (v. 1–2) are genuinely confused, and they should be. His actions run counter to a bunch of fairly compelling biblical injunctions about avoiding corruption and contamination.[4] Meals mean solidarity. Jesus' rejoinder is not unwarranted.

The repetition of "lost and found" is crowned with "rejoicing" (v. 32). Rejoicing is a key term in all three parables. In the culminating parable of the prodigal son, a banquet ensues—"let us eat and celebrate" (v. 23; cf. v. 32). This is a moment of extravagance, which is a hallmark of parabolic discourse. The meaning of the story overflows its narrative confines, situating itself in real life. Such a celebratory conclusion alludes to a major theme of the Gospels: Dining with outcasts heralds the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Second, the emphasis on the word "lost" foreshadows the moment later in Luke when

4. Here are just a few examples: "One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray" (Proverbs 12:26), "Keep company with the wise and you will become wise. If you make friends with stupid people, you will be ruined. Trouble follows sinners everywhere, but righteous people will be rewarded with good things" (Proverbs 13:20-21), "I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked" (Psalm 26:4-5). Character is contagious. This is something social science can demonstrate nowadays, but there it is in the wisdom of the Psalms and Proverbs. Nor does the teaching fall away in the New Testament: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Jesus says to that little prodigal tax-collector Zacchaeus—with whom he breaks bread, of course—"The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (19:10). But how? How does Jesus seek and save? Only by *becoming* lost humanity; in the language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, even by becoming sin itself. Paul writes, "For our sake, God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The leap from the prodigal son to the Son of God is not so great then, if we remember the rest of the story. Philippians 2 and Romans 5 are decisive intertexts for both Julian and Barth. The eternal Son did not stay home and grasp after equality, like the elder brother. He went into the distant land of human lostness, taking the form of a servant, obedient to the point of death. He became the second Adam, the second prodigal, overriding fallen human identity, making it his own, traversing the same circuit to redirect it, entering exile to overcome exile, lowering himself that we might be exalted (2 Cor. 11:7).

The last rhetorical clue is the most conspicuous. Twice the father says, "My son [your brother] *was dead and is alive again*…" Barth asks if this is "almost too strong to be applied…to the lost son of the parable." Reading this passage in the context of Jesus' life, as a gospel within the gospel, the repetition of the words "dead and alive" bring to mind the whole passion sequence, Jesus' own death and resurrection. The life of the storyteller reverberates within the story, and vice versa.[5]

We moderns have strict boundaries between fiction and life, what's written and what's real. But Jesus offers himself as a walking interpretation of the scriptures.[6] He doesn't go around telling stories peripheral to who he is. He is saying to his listeners, "I *am* how I live." With a few key terms, he vividly implicates himself in the prodigal's story. He enacts the same grace he narrates. In the end, Jesus presses an expectable illustration of the virtue of liberality to its breaking point. In his identification with the lost, he is not perfectly freehanded or moderate.

5. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 150. It has often been noted that the Gospels are comprised of smaller stories that "represent little Gospels in the larger one" or "present the larger story in microcosm," in Amos Wilder's words. He says, "One can speak of a single farthing of the Gospel (i.e., the widow's mite) as the key to salvation." See Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 58-59.

6. This is an instance of "narratological metalepsis," which refers to the porosity between 1) narrative levels and voices as well as 2) the story proper (or *the told* and the narration or *the telling*). Metalepsis is an important device in the composition of stories and especially in embedded narratives such as the parables of Jesus.

He is the excessive one—gratuitous, even reckless. "He hazards himself," Barth says.[7] He is the form of the true prodigal.

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Julian's retelling of the parable culminates with a beautiful image summarizing the meaning of the parabolic father's lovingkindness. Over against the doomsayers of her age, she encourages us to imagine the divine gaze not as that of a punishing judge or distant lord but of a tender mother. She says of Jesus,

> He wants us to behave like a child; for when it is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and he wants us to do the same, like a humble child saying, 'My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me'… he wants us to take on the nature of a child which always naturally trusts the love of its mother in weal and woe." (trans. Spearing, 144)

The humility of a child is qualitatively different than that of a servant or a debtor. Julian doesn't deny the crushing reality of sin and suffering, but she focuses her readers pastorally on *God's* perspective.[8] God, like the parabolic father or a wise mother, does not reproach us with "Sinner!" at a distance, but comes close and beckons, "Darling child." Sin's story denies God's pronouncement even as it shrouds its own conviction of undeservingness in devotion. But, Barth explains, true faith is disbelief in our own rejection.[9] It means trusting that we are not disowned or disinherited.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is indeed the story of grace and mercy par excellence. But we stop short of its radical meaning if we read it merely as an account of human repentance and divine forgiveness. We remain trapped in the old view if we accept the son's confession, "I am not worthy." Our place in the household of God is not won through labor or lost through wandering. In the end, we are all like the lost son: Our problem is not that we asked for too much, but that we accepted too little. We are invited back for the rest. What do we "owe" in return? Not the prodigal's plea to his father, "Make me a lowly wage laborer." Not the elder's self-assertion, "I have worked hard for you." But the posture of an unconditionally secure child who readily avails herself of her mother's consoling embrace.

And Franny is right—you don't even have to believe it at first. Quantity turns into quality. The words are self-activating.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a poor child.

This essay was adapted from a chapel talk given at Eastern University in March 2023.

7. Karl Barth, *CD* II/2, 161; cf. IV/2, 401.

8. Julian has a great deal to say about sin and fallenness that cannot be addressed here. Nor would I want the narrow scope of this reading to suggest that confessing sins and committing to discipline aren't an important part of the life of faith. But Julian's nondominant account of sin draws attention to the fact that different audiences very often need different emphases. Theology has often been written from positions of dominance, leading to a misrepresentation of sin primarily as pride. But the injured and humiliated particularly need to hear that God's judgment and justice is on their side and not against them. It is not opposed to mercy but, in such cases, identical with it.

9. *CD*, II/2, 167.

Four Poems

By Brian Volck

A SINNER'S PRAYER

Master of patience, forever
abiding our tedious presumptions,
do more, I beg You, than forgive
these sidelong glances as I pray,
sizing up the many I deem less
deserving of your attention.

Bind instead my hands, my heart,
and lead me, tethered, from the plinth
of respectability I've raised
in the eyes of these decent people
who know me by name.

Drag me to the rear of this church
in which we pray for the poor
and trust You'll follow through
without our help, back
to where that strange man stands
unshaven, a greasy sweater
bulging through the torn seams
of his overcoat, frantic eyes
betraying a mind mired
in toxins and regret.

He will, I know, smell of alcohol,
sweat, and urine, but even
from this distance, I see his lips
sound words I've yet to learn
as his troubling presence schools
those who, like me, mistake
good manners for a moral life,
how silently, how long You wait
in the upright heart for its turning.

A RICH YOUNG MAN

(Mark 10:17–31)

From this vantage, which for lack
of a better word, I'll call a height,
I nearly apprehend what then
I could not hope to grasp:

the intersecting ironies as,
in willful self-defeat, I turned,
unable to abide the relentless
interrogation of his eyes,

their centers dark as fire-blackened
crucibles, yet radiant with heat
that I mistook for censure.
Recoiling in shame, I fled,

scourging myself through long years
of regret until, nearing an end,
and by sudden circumstance unshackled
from wealth's burdensome yoke,

I understood at last that he loved me,
his harrowing gaze having fixed my face
in his memory more certainly
than his in mine. So,

at our late reunion, the one I called
"Good Rabbi" called me instead by name
and chronicled the course of my
deferred renunciation:

how, even as I swerved to evade
the needle's eye, the graceless arc
of my turning refused to stop
where my heart's despair imagined,

for in that fraught immensity we come
to know as mercy—a sphere without
circumference—every turn we take
may prove a turning toward.

MARY MAGDALENE

Yes, I mistook him for the gardener,
distraught as I was at his absence, yet
when, I now wonder, was he ever not
nurturing me, crouching like one who tends
budding vines in early spring, patiently
cultivating the hard, reluctant soil?

As a ewe to her shepherd, he drew me
with a voice so familiar that simply
by sounding my name he revealed himself—
so visibly changed—as the beloved
I'd watched disgraced, defiled, and hastily
discarded in a now vacant stone tomb.

Sensing my confusion, my burning need
just then to seize and never surrender
him who'd been so cruelly taken from us,
he cautioned me against such crude clinging
while urgent business awaited us both—
he to his father, I to my brothers.

And so he commissioned me messenger
to those fearful, inconstant followers
who had yet to see what I now witnessed:
the wakened eyes of one who'd suffered death,
the wounded brow lit with unmasked glory,
the graceful movement of his mangled hands.

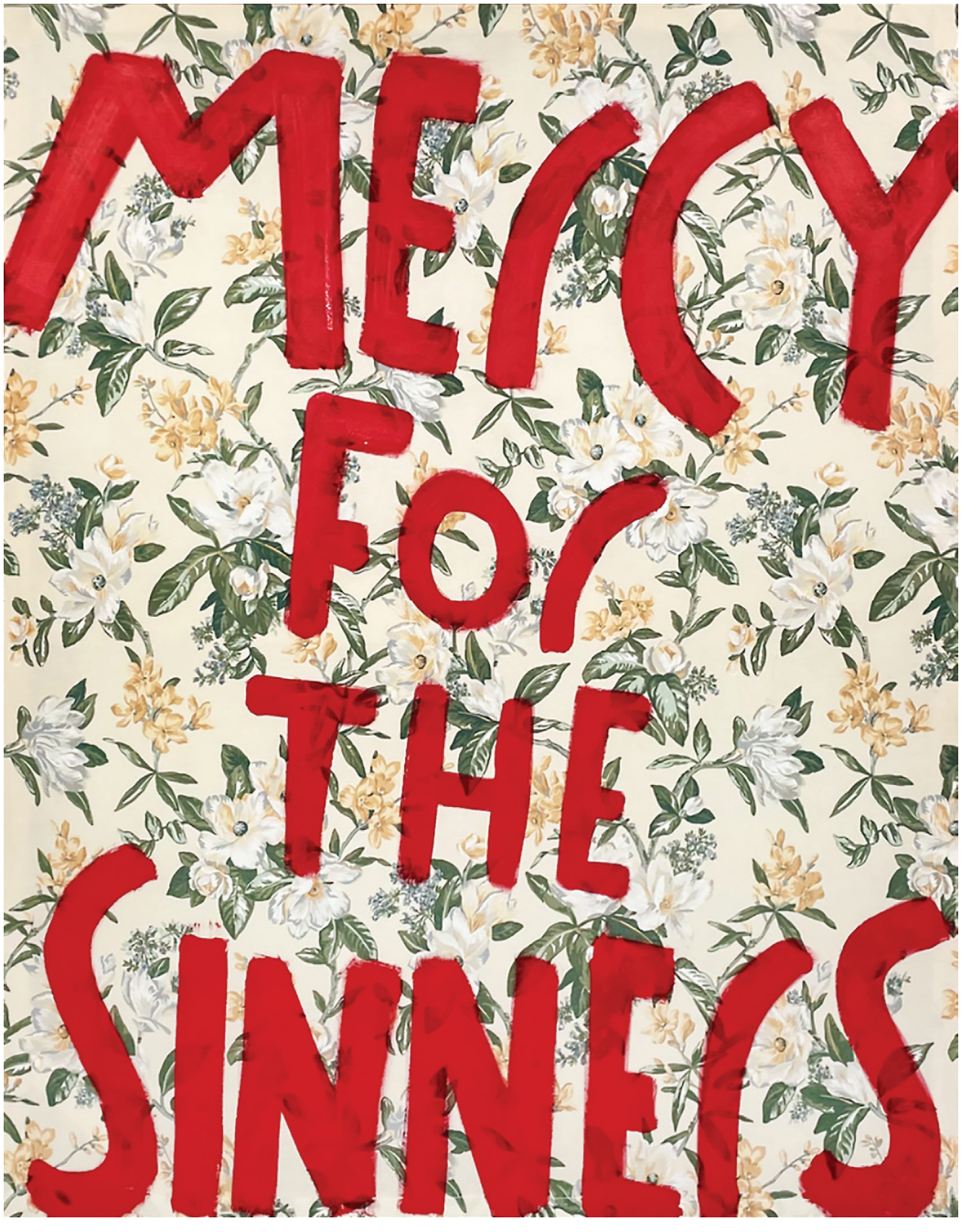
Even now, awaiting death's weakened grip,
I feel that fraught encounter in my bones:
how I lingered, still searching, as my friends
came, looked, and left, not yet apprehending
how near he stood, abiding even then
more closely than my grasping hands could hope.

MY ACCUSER

A thoughtless word when I was twelve,
my no to a son who wanted only
to be held, public embarrassments
long forgotten by everyone but me:
these rise like bubbles in the river
of my mind's monologue, unbidden
indictments in the self's stale ritual
of accusation and insult.

I've long known that voice was neither God's
nor my father's—both forgiving me
before I realized what I'd done—
but the merciless bullying of a boy
with an overlong memory,
inhuman standards, and a dread
of humiliations unseen by others
though they still sting my eyes like smoke.

Freedom's found in unmeasured time,
restless minds yielding to wordless presence—
new boards finely joined, the tending
of tidy gardens, a well-made meal—gifts
found simply in the doing of the thing,
grateful for beauty I neither merited
nor made, yet granted nonetheless,
though I never stopped to ask.



Eric Stefanski, *Mercy For The Sinners*, 2023.
Acrylic on cotton bedsheet, 60 × 48 in.

A Moral Decision That Does Not Make Life Easier

Interview

WITH

Alex Mar

The two should have never reconciled. Paula Cooper was a poor Black girl from an abusive family on the other side of town. At fifteen, she murdered Ruth Pelke, beloved grandmother of Bill Pelke, with a kitchen knife while burglarizing her house. Bill hadn't given a second thought to Paula's death sentence since the day it was handed down. The steel mill worker and Vietnam War veteran was too busy parenting kids with multiple women while managing a drinking problem and recovering from bankruptcy. His grandmother was one of the only family members who had shown him love as he struggled to live a decent life after the war. Even if Paula was one of the first youth in America to be handed the death penalty, Bill agreed that the brutality of her knife stabs merited it. Separated by race and class, by law and trespass, it was too much to expect these two would ever connect, much less reconcile.

That all changed when Bill, working the night shift on the mill crane, had a vision from God of his grandmother. This vision would transform not only the lives of Bill and Paula, but also thousands of similarly grieving hearts, to say nothing about the entire American legal landscape. Because of this vision, Paula would soon receive the first of hundreds of corresponding letters from Bill, which offered the teenage offender forgiveness, prayer, and advocacy. Thirty-five years later, the ripples of their reconciliation can still be felt in the legal, theological, and cultural conflicts of our time.

You can't blame Alex Mar for stopping to document this true-to-life miracle. After an initial phone call with Bill Pelke, the writer devoted the next five years of her life to the story of this unlikely friendship and its far-reaching consequences. In

the process, she recorded first-hand accounts of the freeing and offensive nature of mercy, as well as the complex way that faith and forgiveness mingle in the contexts of the courtroom and the prison cell. The result is *Seventy Times Seven: A True Story of Murder and Mercy*, a non-fiction portrait of the transformative power of forgiveness that doesn't offer trite answers. Instead, Mar invites her readers to join her in witnessing a marvel and a miracle, as one unexpected act of forgiveness opens a deep well of possibility and hope to everyone who's ever been trespassed against.

Mar is also the author of the widely lauded *Witches of America* and the director of the feature-length documentary *American Mystic*. Her writing has appeared in *New York*, *Wired*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *The Guardian*, as well as *The Best American Magazine Writing*. She has been a finalist for the National Magazine Award in Feature Writing. It was a unique pleasure and joy to discuss her experience writing *Seventy Times Seven* and to learn from someone who has plumbed the depths of forgiveness and has yet to find its bottom.

— Bryan Jarrell, interviewer

Mockingbird

When we got in touch on Twitter, one of the first things I told you was, "I'm halfway through your book and I had to put it down because I was crying on the train." I hope that wasn't too much. They were cathartic tears; they weren't sad tears.

Alex Mar

Oh, well, I'm glad. It's interesting because even though I've published different kinds of work over the years, this is the first time I've had multiple people write me notes that the story had made them cry. I've done a couple of events where someone in the audience was in tears. I'm not saying that's because of what an impressive writer I am—this is just a true story that is extremely moving. That's how I felt and why I ended up working on it for so many years.

M

In other projects, like *Witches of America* and *American Mystic*, you focused on other religions and spiritualities, like fairy paganism, Indigenous People's spirituality, and satanism. Do you think *Seventy Times Seven* fits in with those projects, documenting an unusual form of spirituality or religion?

AM

My whole life I've been fascinated with organized religion, and more generally, belief systems. What are the deeply held beliefs that guide our lives, especially when we end up in an extreme situation? What do we turn to for guidance?

Sometimes it's the faith we were born into and raised in. It could be the faith we converted into as an adult—a surprising discovery that resonated for you. For some

people, it's the letter of the law. Honestly, sometimes it could be as simple as something your mother said to you when you were a child that just remains in your mind.

To be less abstract, I'm especially interested in scenarios where people make what they feel is a moral decision that does not make their lives easier. It's a decision that immediately sets them apart from friends, maybe even from their family, from the community. It doesn't come with any kind of fringe benefits. It doesn't make them an instant hero. Where does that kind of conviction come from?

Someone like Bill Pelke, when he made the decision to forgive the girl who killed his grandmother—he was very much alone. He was treated like a pariah. In the book, you see different people in his life wrestle with his decision for a long time. It was even related to the end of his marriage. A lot of the people who knew him were not comfortable with his life of activism.

That was as much a challenge to me as an individual, as I hope it is for readers.

M

This act of forgiveness is just so unpopular for so many people, and from so many angles, yet he wholeheartedly commits to it.

AM

That was riveting to explore. And honestly, when I first just stumbled upon Paula Cooper, I was researching a lot of violent crimes committed specifically by women. I was interested in understanding those patterns more. But when I stumbled upon her case—the forgiveness aspect of it—it really put its hooks into me.

One of the first things I did was track down Bill's number. I gave him a call just to see if he'd be willing to talk a little bit more about that decision that he made decades earlier. And he was so open and willing to explore that topic with me in a personal way. That's when I knew I needed to dive in.

I think forgiveness is an interesting theme throughout. Monica Foster, who's one of the appellate attorneys for Paula, describes herself as a flaming atheist. She was raised Catholic in the Northeast, but when she was an adult, she rejected the faith of her childhood. And so I asked her point blank: "What is it then that motivates you to fight on behalf of so many convicted, absolutely guilty individuals? You're fighting for mercy. What motivates that?" And she said, I don't know. I just believe in mercy, and if I'm not fighting for them, who's going to? That was simple for her, versus Bill, who's fighting for mercy on Paula's behalf, in great part driven by his interpretation of Christianity. And then you have someone like the prosecutor, Jack Crawford, who was raised Catholic, and went to Mass every Sunday, with his wife and his family. And despite the views of the Catholic Church on the death penalty, he had no problem going for death twenty-two times as a prosecutor. He did not see a significant contradiction there.

And Foster said to me at one point, I knew a lot of Catholics in my social circle who, if someone committed a heinous crime, wanted a tough approach—they wanted someone to go for the ultimate penalty. They weren't letting their faith dictate their views of what constitutes justice. And that's something we wrestle with today in this country, right? How do we design justice? And what values do we want to go into that equation? What will shape that conversation?

M

One of my favorite things about the book was how you were able to profile different sects of the Christian faith and how they view this situation in profoundly different ways. Have you received a lot of feedback from American Christians about the book? Any affirmations or pushback?

AM

On the book tour there were numerous people who, either during the Q&A session or afterwards, would approach me and identify themselves as Christian, or as the pastor of a local congregation, and say, "Here's what is interesting about this topic of forgiveness. Here's what I found so challenging about this story." That was a new experience for me. I thought it was exciting, you know?

I was in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for an event. A man during the Q&A identified himself as a pastor of a local Black congregation. And he said, "Even as a pastor, I don't know if I'd be able to do what Bill Pelke did in this situation. I think this is a tremendous moral challenge to Christians in this country. In terms of this bigger question of: *'Can you walk the walk or is it really just talk?'"* That was his phrasing. I was moved that it inspired him to share in that way.

I haven't heard any pushback. I'm aware that there are people in favor of capital punishment. And there are some people who may be in favor of capital punishment who are using their Christian faith to support that view.

I do want to say, too, that I really went out of my way to write this book in a literary style that is very readable. But also there's a journalistic part, in the sense that I didn't want to be perceived as taking sides or imposing a personal worldview or my own politics on the reader. I'm open to the idea that there may be some readers who sided with the prosecutor after reading this. That's a possibility.

M

I think forgiveness is an act of God—a bit of a miracle. In my mind, this was one of the things the book was about—the power and the miracle of forgiveness. And like you said, you're not trying to compel readers to go one way or another. But when something like this happens, it's so beautiful and powerful and fascinating.

AM

I completely agree. I've certainly thought a lot about forgiveness in family relationships, and I think that's probably one of the more common contexts in which people are grappling with the question of "Are you *capable* of forgiving?"

Getting to know Paula Cooper's sister, Rhonda, took years… I mean, it took about three years of working on the book before she was prepared to sit down and talk with me. She hadn't talked to anyone about her sister and the crime and her experiences since appearing in court back in the 80s. And for good reason—it was a very traumatizing event for her as well. She also was made a pariah through an association with her sister, through her choice to stand by her. She was seen as almost an accomplice by the community, which was incredibly unfair. But the reason I bring this up is, you know, Bill had also attempted over the years to have a relationship with her, as an extension of his relationship with Paula, and Rhonda was extremely hesitant and suspicious of his intention. She didn't feel comfortable. At a certain point, she felt like, "What is this forgiveness on his part? What does it really mean? He doesn't know." And I thought, there's something valid there.

I brought this up to Bill, and there's a mention of it in the book where he acknowledged to me: "You know what? I had never in my life spent a moment thinking about the life of a young Black girl living twenty minutes away in the same town. I never spent a moment imagining what the life of a kid in that neighborhood might be like." It took this horrific tragedy to force him to ultimately think about what Paula's childhood had been like and various other factors.

For me, one of the most powerful things about working on this book was the sense that, when anyone in the community introduces something destructive, it's a danger to all of us. We're all vulnerable. There's this idea that we all live carefully isolated lives in our own homes, and it's all about your own family and maybe a few neighbors you know and feel comfortable with. But if there are people in your community suffering from abuse, from addiction, from whatever it is, there's always a chance that you are going to feel some of that pain someday, right?

And so, you have this young girl—why does she snap on that spring afternoon in 1985? And Bill over the years ended up reflecting a lot on the living circumstances of other people in the community. Is there an opportunity to prevent the creation of another Paula Cooper?

All of these people with such disparate backgrounds were thrown together by this one act of violence—and also by Bill's choice to forgive, which really changed how people viewed the case. That made a point of connection between multiple people whose lives otherwise would never have collided.

And there's Father Vito, the Franciscan friar, who is sent from Rome to a death row in Indianapolis and then ends up teaming up with the appellate attorneys. And against all odds, despite just being kind of a regular, keep your head down, nine-to-five steel worker, Bill finds himself marching in the streets in rallies.

It made me think a lot about the potential that we all have to make a bold choice and to act in a way that might surprise ourselves. We have the potential to change course and impact the lives of others.

M

If we loved our neighbor, how much of the hardship of the world would go away?

AM

[Laughs] That's it! Thank you for simplifying it.

M

It's funny, right? Jesus is like, "Love your neighbor," and then one guy raises his hand out there, and he's like, "Who *exactly* is my neighbor that I have to love?"

At the end of the book, you start off the acknowledgements by saying, "Bill Pelke was my friend and I miss him." That was so touching that you had this time to develop a deep and meaningful friendship with him. Could you share some insight about that friendship?

AM

Oh absolutely. At the heart of this story, there were a handful of people whose experience I was trying to understand. I don't even know how much time I spent traveling with Bill around Indiana, Texas, DC. And there were so many phone calls, so many drives with the tape recorder going. It took place over the course of five years.

Through the process of him sharing with me some of the toughest and lowest mo-

ments in his life, whether it was this terrible murder of his grandmother who he loved so dearly, or it was the dissolution of a marriage that had meant so much to him, or the challenge of going to visit a friend on death row, we were just spending time together and, you know, he would sing country songs in the car and we would stay up late with some of his colleagues in a pub. And they would tell stories of so many trips that they took as [a part of the advocacy and support group] Murder Victims Family Members, organizing trips together, where they had stood on the steps of the Supreme Court and been arrested together, and so on. He and his closest band of friends and colleagues had a great sense of humor about the challenges of that kind of work. Because I think you need to develop that in order to keep up that energy and that heart to keep going, right?

M

And to stay sane.

AM

And to stay sane! And it was totally infectious. We really came to see each other as friends, and I really treasure that experience.

Monica Foster was someone else I got to know well and had such incredible talks with. She was only a handful of years older than Paula herself when she was assigned to the case. But you know, very early on it became much more than business for her. Her heart went out to this teenage girl on death row. It was a revelation for me because I had never in my life given thought to the toll that capital cases have on the attorneys involved. They develop a relationship with their client, who could be executed at the end of the day. There's this persistent feeling that there's something you neglected to do on their behalf…and to sustain that kind of work for decades. I have enormous respect for that. It made my job working on a difficult book seem a lot easier—if she could handle that, I could sit down at my laptop and hammer it out.

M

I figure I owe you a quick explanation. The part of the book that I wept about was maybe not the part that other people would weep at: It was the scene where Bill has his vision.

Maybe I'm off on this, but I'd love to hear your feedback. He could easily see his grandmother forgiving Paula Cooper, so by extension, if she could forgive Paula Cooper, maybe she could forgive him and his sort of black sheep lifestyle? That's the part of the book that made me weep, because I recognized myself and many of my peers in that moment. This call and clarity about forgiveness and absolution.

I wonder if you think there's a link between people experiencing forgiveness and their willingness to forgive others. I wonder if there's something about that connection where Bill sort of sees himself as forgiven so he can extend that to other people? And whether that's a pattern that you've noticed in your own life, or just in researching the book?

AM

That is an interesting question. You know, between Bill and several other Murder Victims Family Members who I got to know, I was left with the impression that having forgiven someone who had wronged them so deeply made them far more capable of taking that view in a lot of other extreme cases that came up later. It seemed like once they broke through that barrier for themselves,

they were able to take a merciful or compassionate view in response to any number of stories that they encountered.

Your question makes me look back a little differently right now at one of the painful ironies in my research: I don't know if I ever saw a correlation between being willing to forgive someone who would take the life of your loved ones and having the ability to forgive yourself. There were several people I met who probably are, I think, incredibly tough on themselves in spite of the fact that they were willing to forgive others in an extreme circumstance. There's something so complex about the human spirit—that you can take that kind of leap and not necessarily be kinder to yourself.

M

I've heard you say in other interviews that writing the book made you think about things differently, that you're still sort of decompressing, that you haven't really figured out what it means yet. Is that still the case for you?

AM

Working on this project only deepens my sense of how complex the act of forgiveness is, and how powerful, and how different it is for different people in different situations. I don't want to presume that I could somehow predict my response in the face of a terrible personal tragedy. And I pray that I never have to find that out about myself.

Someone like Bill Pelke and the Murder Victim's Family Members—it took them a lot of time and personal processing to not just forgive in concept, but to release it, to feel it deep inside them. To feel that what they were saying was real. That came up repeatedly, that it was a complex extended process. For that reason, I shy away from making any simple statements.

I do feel, more than ever, that in order for our criminal justice system to get closer to some kind of justice, we need a lot more room. We need to insert a lot more room into the process for people to acknowledge that there is a family on either side, that there are full human beings on either side of the aisle in any courtroom for any case and regardless of what kinds of emotions you may have towards the defendant. They're not standing there alone, and there's a much bigger picture that requires us to have empathy.

The idea of being tough on crime has done a lot of damage, because it's such a winning slogan, and it really works when people campaign for office. But it has really shut down the process of imagining ourselves towards a safer community. A lot of that process, I believe, has to do with focusing on our common humanity.

By Katelyn Beaty

Mercy Begets Mercy...

Even for Ourselves

When Brené Brown's books and TEDx talks entered the mainstay more than a decade ago, I was, I admit, a skeptic. Brown's popular teachings on vulnerability, shame, and courage felt too goopy to me, too wobbly to hang any of my experiences onto.

Then, a few years back, I had a crushing experience of shame for something I had done that had hurt a friend and betrayed my values. The details aren't necessary to share, and doing so might only create more hurt. The important thing is that the offense swallowed up my sense of self; it revealed that I was *the type of person* who would do such a bad thing.

In light of this, as it turned out, something goopy was in order.

Shame is having a moment, as Brown and many others have pointed out. The Internet is a place where group identity—among gamers, or activists, or Christians—is fortified by shaming others. We know who we are by deriding who we are not. We know our actions are good or bad not by what our conscience tells us—the traditional definition of guilt—but by what our online neighbors tell us. If our worst moments appear online, we may be able to apologize for them, but we can never delete them either, for the Internet never dies. There are few paths available for forgiveness and repair, and this leaves offenders in digital purgatory.

Beyond the social elements of modern shaming, many of us carry an acute inner sense of wrongness. Brown's distinction is helpful: Guilt says, "I did something bad," while shame says, "I am bad." Shame has a way of collapsing actions into identity.

As a moral emotion, guilt is empowering. It can spur us to repair things with people we've hurt, and to repent, to go in a new direction. The prayer of confession in the Christian liturgy gives us words to name sins "in thought, word, and deed," even the sin of good deeds left undone. Week

after week we are invited to think back to the ways we've fallen short. There is never a week when we needn't confess our shortcomings; and there are always things we can name, repent of, and be assured of forgiveness for in the new week ahead. In addition, a sense of our guiltiness and need of grace invites us to turn toward others, to respond in empathy to people we've hurt. The times in my life when I have felt guilty—or, in the language of my upbringing, "convicted by the Spirit"—I received it as an invitation. Now that I can see my sin, I can confess it, experience God's mercy, and move forward feeling lighter and freer.

Shame felt nothing like this. Rather, it felt like I had cast myself out of the realm of belonging and love. While others could enter the gates of the garden of goodness, I was out and I had no way to get back in. Like Taylor Swift, shame said, "*I'm* the problem, it's me." The monster on the hill

Hillerbrand-Magsamen, *#50: A Device to Forgive Yourself for All the People You've Wronged*, 2018. Archival Pigment Print, 16 × 16 in. ©Hillerbrand+Magsamen

could never hang out with the sexy babies.

Of course, in this wrestling with shame, which persisted for the good portion of a year, I knew the traditional Christian categories. I knew the right answers. The imaginary Reformed men who sometimes sit on my shoulders intoned, "Well, in fact, there is nothing good in you; you are a worm. Your shame is telling you the truth about who you are. Your only hope is to cast yourself upon the mercy of Jesus and believe in his total atonement on your behalf. In fact, your shame arises from pride, because pride prevents you from believing God's mercy is sufficient." I could (and do!) doctrinally assent to some of this, but as you might imagine, repeating this kind of answer in my head did nothing to relieve the shame. Instead, it added a perverse religious tinge to a miserable state, as if God received more glory from my self-abasement, as if misery was the point.

Curt Thompson is having none of this. Thompson is a psychiatrist and popular author who calls shame a tool that evil uses to undo God's good purposes for us and for Creation. In his book *The Soul of Shame*, he calls it

> the emotional weapon that evil uses to (1) corrupt our relationships with God and each other, and (2) disintegrate any and all gifts of vocational vision and creativity… Shame, therefore, is not simply an unfortunate, random, emotional event that came with us out of the primordial evolutionary soup. It is both a source and result of evil's active assault on God's creation, and a way for evil to try to hold out until the new heaven and earth appear at the consummation of history.

Shame tells us to hide from others, to keep others at bay for fear of what they'll see if they get close. As such, shame steals our birthright, for we were made to connect with God, others, and even ourselves. We were made to rest in the embrace of the One who doesn't just tolerate us but created us to dwell with him forever. Connection is our *telos*—the thing for which we are made, the destination we are headed toward.

• • • • •

My shame was abated by something that doesn't fit neatly into categories of Christian teaching. To this day, I'm still trying to make sense of it, although, even more, I am grateful for its unexpected grace and the healing it brought.

On a Friday morning two summers ago, amid this intense shame season, I woke up with the kind of inner turmoil that I had grown used to, with different parts of myself warring back and forth in my mind. One part chided the other part for the original offending act that had hurt my friend. *How could you have done that? You are bad. You aren't safe. You don't belong here*. And the other part of myself crouched in self-defense, trying to protect herself against these accusations. *You're being too harsh. You don't understand me.*

After what seemed like a long time of inner warring, out of the blue an image came to mind—of these two parts embracing one another. Each could stay. Both belonged. Both had an important role to play. Both could learn to trust one

another. Both had a seat at the table. And something about this image—of the two warring parts of myself embracing and reconciling to one another—allowed me to have compassion on the person who had hurt her friend; to consider more of the surrounding details that precipitated the offense; to see the offending action with mercy; and to not collapse the action into identity.

The idea of "forgiving yourself" doesn't find much purchase in Christian teaching. Of course, we can't make things right within ourselves. That's the point; God in Christ came to Earth to do what humans couldn't do for themselves, to wipe clean the moral slate, restoring us to right relationship with God and others. In addition, the aforementioned Reformers would say that "self-forgiveness" isn't biblical, but rather a therapeutic category of pop psychology. If you believe that God forgives you completely, you don't need to forgive yourself.

Then again, pop psychology has some helpful insights into how and why shame persists even when someone has the right theological response to it. According to Thompson, shame isn't intellectual but physiological, something we feel in our bodies. Many of us experience shame even before we can speak in our relationship with our caregivers, shame that signals to our nervous systems that our actions will lead to our abandonment. "The sensation and emotional tone of shame is like none other," he writes. "Few emotional states can match it for how unbearably painful it can be."

In contemporary conversations about deconstruction and deconversion, many people say they were taught Christianity in ways that reinforced their essential badness, their "wormness," in ways that prevented them from believing that God doesn't just love them but also *likes* them. Purity culture taught that bodies and their desires are bad and dirty, leading to unshakable sexual shame even within the context of marriage. In essence, shame was used to keep people in line. These deconstruction stories remind us that if God's love is taught in harsh, nitpicky, and shame-filled ways, God's love is go-

ing to sound like "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

Whether or not "forgiving yourself" is a helpful way of overcoming shame, God sees our past selves with the eyes of mercy, and in light of this, our own eyesight can readjust. We can look back at mistakes, missteps, and even grievous sins, grapple with the harm they caused, and *also* see that we were operating with limited knowledge, spiritual malformation from our family or church, or good intentions gone awry. On the cross, Jesus prays for the Father to forgive his tormentors, "for they know not what they do." As the liturgy underscores, our sin is about commission, but it is also about omission—and often, *we don't even know what we don't know*. God extends mercy for the things we don't even know to confess.

Cultivating a more merciful view of our past selves could help address the elements of our Christian upbringing—the focus of so much deconstruction critique—that were "totes cringe." I think of the time I tried to evangelize a college boyfriend that landed with a thud (he had grown up Catholic!), and effectively ended our dating relationship. Remembering what I said and how I said it, I do cringe. I could scoff at my younger self and the faith community that had taught her that it was imperative to share the Good News as bluntly as possible. And I could remember that I was trying to do the best I could within the framework I had been given. To be sure, acknowledging our prior blind spots doesn't let us off the hook for harm done; nor does it cancel out the need to confess to God and to try to make things right with others. There's an impulse in deconstruction narratives to apply to people and experiences the rigid binary previously taught, only in the opposite direction. Neither, in my view, leads to health.

For several days after the image of the two warring parts of myself finally embracing came to mind, I felt like a veil had been lifted, that everyone I encountered or saw on the street was a self-evidently eternal creature, a person uniquely loved and known by God, knitted within the human family and made for connection and belonging and joy. This spiritually heightened view lasted for approximately one week, and then the veil came down. But the crushing weight of shame hasn't returned. And in its absence, and in light of the Ultimate Mercy who holds all of us—our past, present, and future selves—I can more clearly see others with the eyes of mercy, too. As goopy as it might be, we can't show mercy to others unless we know mercy for ourselves. Shamed people shame people, but mercy-filled people are merciful to people. And just as shames isolates and thrives in secret, so mercy brings our worst offenses into the light and meets them with compassion. Mercy begets mercy. It might even be the thing that heals us all from our societal spiral of shame.

For Thy Tender Mercies' Sake

Prayers in the Hands of a Loving God

According to Christianity, mercy is an essential characteristic of God. Pope Francis had it right when he wrote, "There is no Christianity without mercy… God's mercy is our liberation and our happiness. We live of mercy and we cannot afford to be without mercy. It is the air that we breathe. We are too poor to set any conditions." And if the experience of mercy is perhaps the central theme of the Christian life, it is not surprising that it would also be a central component of Christian prayer.

When asked how one should pray, Abba Macarius, one of the desert fathers, responded thus: "There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer say, 'Lord, help!' He knows very well what we need, and he shows us his mercy."

This singular emphasis on mercy is one echoed not only in the prayers of scripture but in countless Christian prayer books and devotional texts down through the centuries. In perhaps the most famous English language prayer book, the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*, mercy is a downright incessant theme: In the 1976 edition, the word "mercy" and its variants occur a combined 508 times. For those in similar liturgical traditions, mercy is the focus of many of our most-used prayers.

And why? Because it's what we all need most. With that in mind, here are 21 of our favorite mercy-full prayers:

A PRAYER FOR A NEW YEAR

Almighty God,
by whose mercy my life has continued for another year,
I pray that, as my years increase, my sins may not increase.
As age advances,
let me become more open, more faithful and more trusting in you.
Let me not be distracted by lesser things
from what is truly unimportant
And if I become frail as I grow old,
may I not be overwhelmed by self-pity or bitterness.
Continue and increase your loving-kindness towards me,
so that, when you finally call me to yourself,
I may enter into eternal happiness with you,
through Jesus Christ my Lord.

— Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

A PRAYER FOR COMFORT

Almighty and everlasting God, the comfort of the sad, the strength of those who suffer; hear the prayers of your children who cry out of any trouble; and to every distressed soul grant mercy, relief and refreshment.

— The Gelasian Sacramentary (8th cent.)

THE JESUS PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy on me,
a sinner.

— The Desert Fathers (5th cent.)

A PRAYER OF GRATITUDE

Merciful Lord, it does not surprise me that you forget completely the sins of those who repent. I am not surprised that you remain faithful to those who hate and revile you. The mercy which pours forth from you fills the whole world. It was by your mercy that we were created, and by your mercy that you redeemed us by sending your Son. Your mercy is the light in which sinners find you and good people come back to you. Your mercy is everywhere, even in the depths of hell where you offer to forgive the tortured souls. Your justice is constantly tempered with mercy, so you refuse to punish us as we deserve. O mad Lover! It was not enough for you to take on our humanity; you had to die for us as well.

— St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)

A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE

O Lord, Pharoah is wandering in your land!
The devil holds the neck of your daughters.
Loudspeakers are everywhere, rejecting your religion.
The body of Christ is blistered with divisions,
and your people are busy amputating your body.
Where are the winds of heaven and the thunder of your voice?
Where is the arm of God?
Where are your wonders, acts of power, and fountains of mercy?

I cannot be convinced that you have forgotten your mercies,
and so I wait for you.
Have mercy on me and my country.
Have mercy on us and guide your people.
Bring millions of believers to your church.
O Lord—*Kyrie eleison*.
Have mercy, O Lord!

— Yohanna Katanacho (1967–) (Palestinian Israeli theologian)

A NOONDAY PRAYER

Blessed Savior,
at this hour you
hung upon the
cross, stretching
out your loving
arms: Grant that
all the peoples
of the earth
may look to you
and be saved;
for your tender
mercies' sake.
Amen.

—*The Book of Common Prayer*

A PRAYER FOR HOPE

When my heart is dry and parched,
come with a merciful shower.

When grace has departed from life,
come with a burst of song.

— Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

A PRAYER OF DESPERATION

Have mercy on me, Lord, because
I'm frail. Heal me, Lord, because
my bones are shaking in terror!

— Psalm 6:2

A PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

— *The Book of Common Prayer*

A PRAYER FOR ABSOLUTION

When we see dark gray clouds forming in the sky,
we fear a mighty storm.
In the same way when we see the darkness of our sin,
we fear the storm of your wrath.
But just as in truth rain brings new life to the earth,
so you rain down mercy on our sinful souls,
bringing forgiveness and peace.
Be to us always like a mighty storm,
raining down upon us the abundant waters of your mercy.

— Gilbert of Hoyland (c. 1110–1170/2)

A PRAYER AT THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,
grant us peace.

— from the Roman Rite Mass of the Catholic Church

AN ASH WEDNESDAY PRAYER

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

— *The Book of Common Prayer*

A PRAYER FOR THE VICTIMS OF ADDICTION

O blessed Lord, you ministered to all who came to you: Look with compassion upon all who through addiction have lost their health and freedom. Restore to them the assurance of your unfailing mercy; remove from them the fears that beset them; strengthen them in the work of their recovery; and to those who care for them, give patient understanding and persevering love. Amen.

— *The Book of Common Prayer*

A PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION

Come, O Lord, in much mercy down into my soul, and take possession and dwell there. A homely mansion, I confess, for so glorious a Majesty, but such as Thou art fitting up for the reception of Thee, by holy and fervent desires of Thine own inspiring. Enter then, and adorn, and make it such as Thou canst inhabit, since it is the work of Thy hands.

— St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

A PRAYER FOR REFUGE (AN EXCERPT)

Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise,
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies.

To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal;
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel.

But oh! when gloomy doubts prevail,
I fear to call Thee mine;
The springs of comfort seem to fail,
And all my hopes decline.

Yet gracious God, where shall I flee?
Thou art my only trust,
And still my soul would cleave to Thee,
Though prostrate in the dust.

Thy mercy seat is open still,
Here let my soul retreat;
With humble hope attend Thy will,
And wait beneath Thy feet.

— Anne Steele (1717–1778)

A PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE

Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of Thee; Thou only knowest what I need; Thou lovest me better than I know how to love myself. O Father! Give to Thy child that which he himself knows not how to ask. I dare not ask for crosses or consolations; I simply present myself before Thee; I open my heart to Thee. Behold my needs which I know not myself; see and do according to Thy tender mercy. Smite, or heal; depress me, or raise me up; I adore all Thy purposes without knowing them; I am silent; I offer myself in sacrifice; I yield myself to Thee; I would have no other desire than to accomplish Thy will. Teach me to pray. Pray Thyself in me.

— François Fénelon (1651–1715)

A PRAYER AT THE TIME OF DEATH

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant [___]. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him/her* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.

— *The Book of Common Prayer*

A PRAYER OF HUMILITY

Look, Lord,
on an empty vessel that needs to be filled.
In faith I am weak—strengthen me.
In love I am cold—warm me and make me fervent
so that my love may go out to my neighbor.
I doubt and am unable to trust you completely.
Lord, strengthen my faith and trust in you.
You are all the treasure I possess.
I am poor, you are rich,
and you came to have mercy on the poor.
I am a sinner, you are goodness.
From you I can receive goodness,
but I can give you nothing.
Therefore I shall stay with you.

— Martin Luther (1483–1546)

A NIGHTTIME PRAYER

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— *The Book of Common Prayer*

A PENTECOST PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit, come,
With energy divine,
And on this poor, benighted soul
With beams of mercy shine.

O, melt this frozen heart;
This stubborn will subdue;
Each evil passion overcome,
And form me all anew.

— Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795)

LISTEN, LORD: A PRAYER FOR FELLOW SINNERS

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners—
Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,
Who seem to love their distance well.

— James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938)

By John Casteen

Stay This Moment

An evening. Throb and hustle parse the set
of the going sun. Regalia of the day's cool end.
The dark we'll see between the stars will wrench

us into language, sign and gesture, wraith
that's wrung out of a contrapuntal blank.
As if just looking, here, were all the way

we'd need to see beyond the silent lives
we live. I like to think the image snaps
the wind within the sieve, the wind whose might

might otherwise have been ignored, or, worse,
felt softly, all along the body, then forgot,
and not held lightly in your hand in verse.

By **Bill Borror**

An Appalachian Commedia

In Four Acts

1. ORIGO

> Appalachia, in fact, is a very matriarchal culture. We revere our grandmothers and mothers… In Appalachia, everyone has a fierce granny story.
> — Anthony Harkins, *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*

> I hope to write of her what has never been written of any woman. And then may it be pleasing to Him who is the Lord of courtesy, that my soul might go to see the glory of its lady, that is of that blessed Beatrice, who gloriously gazes on the face of Him *qui est per omnia secula benedictus:* who is blessed throughout all the ages.
> — Dante, *The Vita Nuova*

Walking into the light of a spring day, my friend Jim and I were recapping the Dante Ph.D. seminar we had just been a part of. We had designed this class ourselves, recruiting two of the best medieval literature students in the school and going to one of our professors to ask if he would preside over a literary and theological exploration of *The Divine Comedy*. Our teacher (who, while a student at Oxford, regularly had tea with C. S. Lewis) had introduced us to Charles Williams's masterpiece *The Figure of Beatrice.* This remarkable poetic work traces Dante's Beatrice from a boyhood crush to the feminine representation of transcendent beauty to an icon of the Divine love and mercy that literally leads Dante to Paradise. For a few hours each week that semester, we could have easily been breathing the air of Magdalen College.

"My wife is my Beatrice," Jim said suddenly, and fortunately I looked at him before making some wisecrack. He was beaming with tears in his eyes. "She is the face of God's mercy to me." I suddenly felt stuck on some lower plane of Hell, hanging out with Virgil. "How about you, Bill?" he asked. I thought for an instant about my maternal grandmother, who because of dementia no longer recognized me, but I said nothing.

Nearly a decade later, I was sitting in a therapist's office trying to make sense of my broken internal and personal life. The topic that day had been how struggles with my father somehow reappear in my adult relationships. I had shared some of my insight into him—how his mother had been a distant woman who was never able to show much affection or love. The counselor asked me where I saw the face of mercy and love. Suddenly I was over-

Matthew Brandt, *Birch SP03A*, 2021. Pyrograph on Birch plywood with gold leaf, 71 x 41 x 3/4 in.

come with a sense of grace and love that, for that moment, overwhelmed both my grief and sense of failure. "My maternal grandmother," I said, in a broken voice, "is my Beatrice."

My two grandmothers, both dead for years now, are more than shapers of my parents and childhood. They serve a similar function for me as the cast of characters in *The Divine Comedy*; they are what translator Dorothy Sayers calls *symbolic personages* that represent the fruit of both saying yes to the gift of the Divine mercy and the little *hells* produced in our lives when mercy is rejected. Dante took from Good Friday to Easter and a hundred cantos to tell his story. What follows is not brilliant poetry, but at least it is short, and it is in English.

2. INFERNO

My nature, by God's mercy is made such
    As your calamities can nowise shake
Nor these dark fires have any power to touch
— Dante, *Inferno*, Canto II, 91–93

Maybe the Cumberland Gap just swallows you whole
Maybe the Cumberland Gap just swallows you whole
— Jason Isbell

Mercy is a grace, but it is a journey and a story as well. There are hellish times in every life where it is either rejected or withheld; there are purging struggles where it slowly works its way through psychic scar tissue. And then there are those fleeting, fierce moments where it brands its eternal mark on our very souls. Dorothy Sayers observes that for Dante the fire that torments in Hell and purifies in Purgatory is the same light of God (*Purgatory*, 16). This is also ultimately "the love that moves the sun and the other stars"; the final line and destiny in Paradise.

The name she gave was Caroline,
Daughter of a miner, her ways were free
It seemed to me
That sunshine walked beside her
— Townes Van Zandt

My grandmothers were born exactly a week apart in 1912, in adjacent counties in West Virginia. Their early childhoods were both marked by poverty and limited access to education, and both of their homes were thrown into upheaval when their parents divorced.

One of my maternal grandmother's earliest memories is waiting in desperation to see if her father survived a coal mine collapse. He did but several dozen men did not. But my grandmother did not escape the damage of a broken childhood. Her mother had affairs and her father left the coal mines of West Virginia for the emerging car industry of Detroit. My grandmother ended up living with her grandmother and an uncle in an environment of

abuse and neglect. She escaped by being hired out to work for a wealthy family that seem to have treated her decently. There is a scattering of pictures from her teen years and early adult years of a pretty and wounded young woman trying to smile. My paternal grandmother experienced less disruption but plenty of deprivation. She was able to stay with her mother and siblings. Her father remained in the picture but often lived in drunken squalor.

I am glad I do not know more of the details. I know that as young mothers and wives while taking care of their own families, they each cared for the parent who had caused them the most pain. My maternal grandmother tenderly cared for her broken mother for months as she suffered and died. She had forgiven her. No one can ever remember her saying a disparaging word about her or for that matter anyone else. My Grandmother Borror, according to my dad, would periodically find her father drunk and sick in some filthy apartment, bring him home, clean him up, and nurse him back to health. She was the dutiful daughter but, one senses, at great cost.

3. PURGATORIO

> This mountain is so formed that it is always wearisome when one begins the ascent, but becomes easier the higher one climbs. — *Purgatory*, Canto IV, 88–90

> "Neither Creator nor creature ever,
> Son," he began, "was destitute of love
> Natural or spiritual; and thou knowest it." — *Purgatory*, Canto XVII, 91–93

My grandmothers would both marry in 1934 and each would give birth to a daughter a few years later, with other children to follow. Their husbands would end up working together and the families would occasionally socialize. They would become in-laws in 1959 when my parents married. I would be their first grandchild, born the following year.

But this is where the similarities ended. From an early age the contrasts between my two grandmothers was part of the rhythm of my childhood. Grandma Shirley was light, joy, and unconditional love—lots of hugs and kisses. Grandma Borror was reserved, stern, and serious—short hugs only. Grandma Shirley was fresh baked pie; Grandma Borror was sauerkraut. Christmas at Grandma Shirley's was magic, every inch of the house decorated and full of laughter, with simple, amazing Christmas presents that made you feel like she knew your soul. Grandma Borror had a small artificial tree and gave us new JCPenney underwear every Christmas so that if we had to go to the hospital, we would not be "embarrsed." Grandma Shirley played games with us, took us fishing and on picnics, showed us her flower gardens. Grandma Borror was good to us in her own way, but you also spent a lot of time trying to sit still, particularly if we were unluckily there on a Saturday night and *The Lawrence Welk Show* was on. To this day, the sight of an accordion can evoke violent thoughts in me. Grandma Borror would take us to church and wanted me to be a preacher, though I don't remember her ever talking about her faith. Grandma Shirley taught us to pray, read us Bible stories, and wanted us to know her friend Jesus.

I have often said in the midst of all my intellectual doubts and studies that I have never been able to shake my Grandmother Shirley's Jesus. I also have joked that I am a pastor in spite of the fact that that is what Grandma Borror wanted. I am sure both realities are more complicated than that. But there is something of the purgation of their lives, and the struggle to allow mercy to win, and the beauty of when it does, which has shaped my life and, because of what I do, the lives of hundreds of others.

4. PARADISO

"Direct your mind and gratitude," she said,
"to God, who raised us up to His first star.
We seemed to be enveloped in a cloud
as brilliant, hard, and polished as a diamond
struck by a ray of sunlight."
— *Paradise*, Canto II, 22–33

Almost heaven, West Virginia …
Take me home, country roads
— John Denver, Bill Danoff, Taffy Nivert

This year, in West Virginia, Easter Tuesday is a beautiful spring day; it is also the day of my mother's funeral, and everyone has left. I walk up the hill from the stone that bears the names of my parents to the one bearing the name of my paternal grandmother: Olive W. Borror 1912–1996. Not far from this stone is the one that bears the name of my cousin Jamie. Jamie was moderately high on the spectrum, and the person who could calm and reach her, more than anyone else, was Olive Borror. An autistic grandchild late in life brought out the tenderest and best parts of my grandmother. Jamie, who lived for only a few years after my grandmother died, was her Beatrice. Mercy had the final word.

As I make my way back to the car, something within me requires balance more than closure. So my wife and I drive for about half an hour through the hills to another graveyard. I walk up another hill (in West Virginia, everywhere is up a hill) and stand in front of the grave of my maternal grandmother: Hattie D. Shirley 1912–1998; I had officiated her funeral on Good Friday of that year, almost exactly 25 years from today. I put a handful of flowers left over from Mom's service and place them on the ground in front of her mother's name.

I remember asking my mother once if Grandma Shirley was as good as I remember her. I had begun to question how much of my memory was hagiographic embellishment. My mother had been recovering from a stroke at the time, and her cognitive functions had begun to suffer. So she asked me to tell her what I remembered, and I did, in the beatific language that I so often used. But my mother closed her eyes, smiled, and said, "Oh, she was so much better."

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis: Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

The Confessional

Dearest God,

Back by unpopular demand: me.

What's the tea? It's been a minute, I do realize. Sincerest apologies. *Things* got in the way. Well, You famously already know that, and everything else, which does make this a super awk conversation. Why am I telling You again? Anyway, the sitch—

So supposedly I'm supposed to be "merciful" in order to "receive mercy" or whatever, which does complicate things, but I'll just tell You what's happening, and You can decide for Yourself: I literally can*not* with that bitch Christine. Yesterday she (*once again*) told *everyone* about my…shall we say, *assignation*…with Javier, despite my frequent entreaties to the contrary! She even made up saucy details that were not true (much as I wish they were…).

Now, of course, it is an odd coincidence that my tryst with The Hottest Boy in 11th Grade™ should happen only a week after hers. And cynical lookers-on may well make much of the fact that Christine has been gushing about Javier for over a year. And that she called him "the loml" ("the love of my [her] life," God). I, however, was curious—You know, to see if he lived up to the hype.

You see, Javier should *not* have even looked at me. Not just because he and Christine were kind of already a thing by then, but because I am *me*. No boy has ever looked at me twice, and being wanted like that—even though he was kinda high, and even though he had no other options at the party, and even though my hair was a mess, and even though it was over in five minutes—it felt, I guess, like mercy. Which maybe is exactly what it was, just pity. But it was like someone had finally forgiven me for being mid.

Crinnnnge. Ugh, this is not how I wanted to start my hot girl summer. I know this prayer is *not* giving, and You're prolly just like, sir, this is a Wendy's. And I guess *I'm* the one who actually needs mercy, since I shouldn't have hooked up with Javi. Anyway, Gawd-willing it'll all work out and nobody will hate me.

Christ, have mercy.

By Orrey McFarland

The Basis of God's Mercy

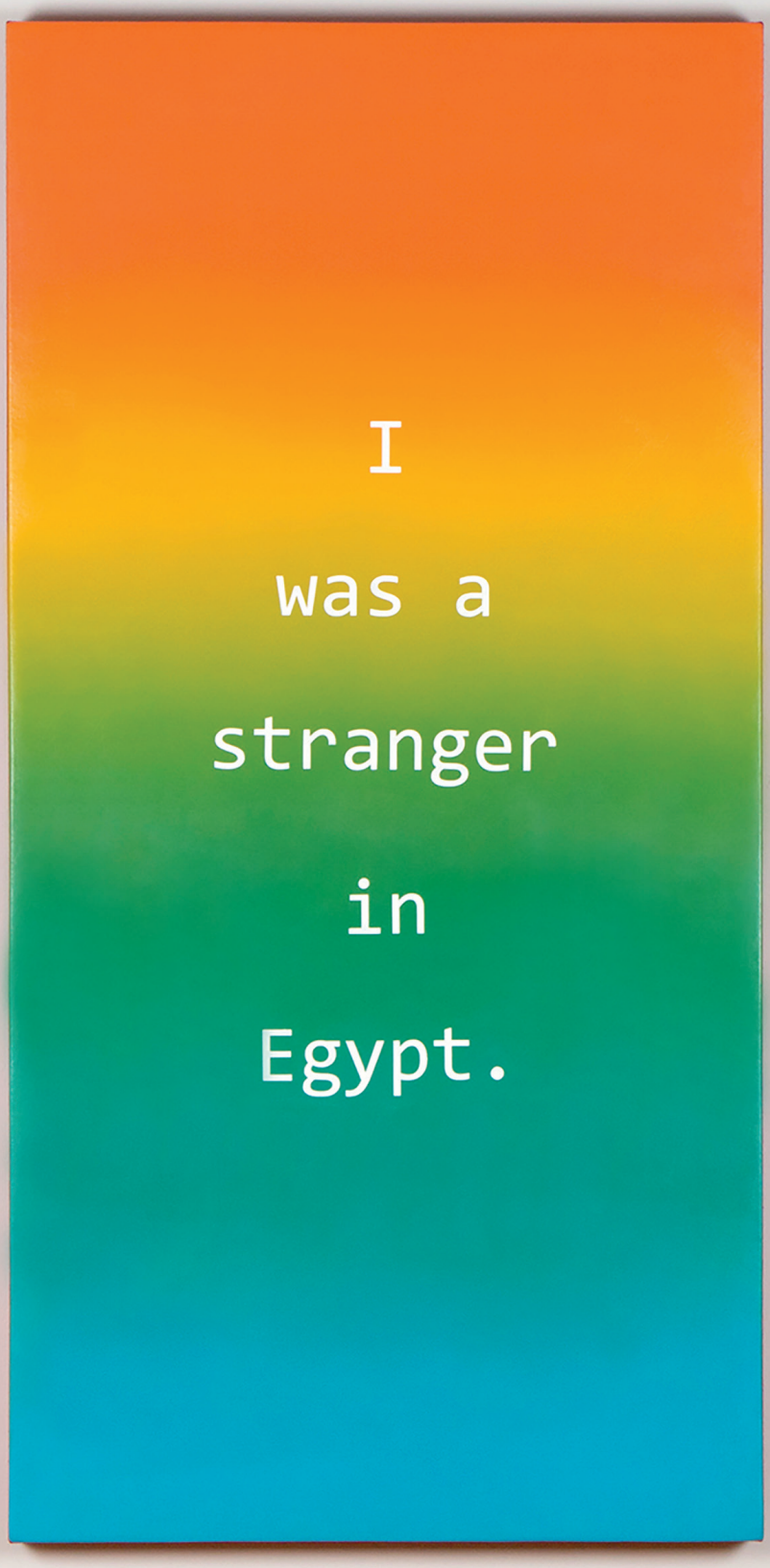
A Comparative Study of Philo and Paul

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" (Exod 33:19; Rom 9:15). Few statements could shift in meaning as much as this one, depending on the character of the speaker. But in this case, the speaker is God. So it prompts the question: When we come to God, what kind of God will we get?

The question could be a scary one to ponder, given the seeming possibility—or even likelihood—that we might fall on the wrong side of God's will. Even more, a quick reading of Romans 9 might make you think that the God of Israel is like the mercurial gods of the Greek pantheon—he is an arbitrarily merciful God: yes to Jacob, no to Esau, and for no apparent reason. We can only hope that we come down on the right side of his capriciousness. Yet Paul assures us that God is just (Rom 9:14). But how can we trust this is so? When God defined his character, he said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God *merciful and gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:6–7). As a result, ancient Jews believed that God wasn't capricious but merciful. Yet the question remains: On what basis do we make sense of his mercy? And what factors determine the kind of God we meet? Here it can be helpful to contrast two ways of making sense of God's mercy.

• • • • •

A near contemporary of Paul, Philo of Alexandria came from a wealthy family and was well-educated in Greek philosophy and the Jewish Scriptures. Much of his writing was devoted to allegorical interpretation of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. In one of his writings, Philo addresses some of the same theological issues Paul does in Romans 9: specifically, why do some receive mercy but not others? For Philo, God's statement from Exodus would be terrifying if he couldn't discern a reason why certain people receive mercy—and specifically a reason in the character of the human recipients. We know God is merciful; yet we see from Scripture that not all receive that mercy; what makes the difference? Like Paul, Philo wanted to show that God was not simply unjust, yet his conclusions are quite different.



Nerry Gabriel Lemus, *I was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me*, 2014.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 24 in.

Philo's solution is to claim that "God has made natures in the soul that are in themselves faulty and blameworthy" and others that are "excellent and praiseworthy" (Leg. 3:75).[1] Every person begins life with a nature that is inherently good or bad. What reveals a person's nature is their name: Behind a person's action is their name, and behind their name is their nature, which provides the grounds for God's mercy—or lack thereof.

For example, the Abram we meet in Genesis 11–12 seems to receive God's calling and promise without cause: As far as we can see, he's a pagan who has done nothing good. But in Philo's reading, the skeleton key to God's favorable actions towards Abram is his name: "God produced this character having an image worthy of zeal, for 'Abram' means 'father high-soaring'" (3:83). As Philo explains, both parts of Abram's name reveal his praiseworthy nature. Accordingly, if we can't find an action to make sense of God's generosity, we turn to the person's name, which reflects their nature. But what if God chooses to bless someone before they're born?

In the case of Jacob and Esau, Philo turns to God's foreknowledge: "God the creator of living beings knows his own handiwork well, even before he has thoroughly chiseled them, both their faculties … and their works and passions" (3:88). Indeed, all that God needs to bless someone is the "slightest breeze of virtue" that "points to leadership and authority" (3:89). God's blessing of Jacob over Esau, therefore, makes sense, because he could see how these two would go on to live their lives: one worthy of blessing, one not.

For Philo, God must bless and give grace in a way that is comprehensible to us. Which means that there will always be some way of explaining why some receive mercy and others do not. That reason will not be a change in the quality of God's mercy; it can only be found in the human recipient.[2]

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In Romans 9, Paul declares that God's promise has not "failed" (9:6). Of course, he sees that not all have believed in the gospel—and so he understands, like Philo, that the Exodus line opens God up to a charge of injustice. Therefore he works through scriptural history to reveal how God's people have always been established by his promise. Paul explores many of the same test cases that Philo does, yet he upends the very explanations Philo gives, because his interpretive key—the thing that unlocks history for him—is the death of Jesus for unworthy sinners, which for him is *the* revelation of God's mercy and grace. In Paul's thought, the Christ-event reverberates backwards into history and forwards into the future as the definition of God's mercy—and therefore the basis for hope.

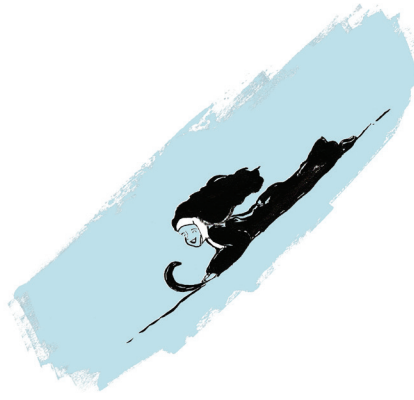
In chapters 1–3 of Romans, Paul launches into a massive argument to show that "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (3:9), that "there is none righteous" (3:10), and that "all have sinned and lack the glory of

1. Philo's writings can be found in ten volumes with two supplements in the Loeb Classical Library (trans. F. H. Colson et al.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929-1962). The work discussed here, *Legum Allegoriae*, means "allegorical interpretation," and can be found in volume one of the LCL edition. A usable one-volume English translation is *The Works of Philo* (trans. C.D. Yonge; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

2. This is a broad but accurate description of Philo's theology of grace. He does leave some room for God giving gifts to the unworthy, though it plays a small and peculiar role in his thought.

God" (3:23). It's in this context that Paul discusses Abraham's faith and righteousness. While a lot could be said here, the main point is that Abraham's faith is specifically in the God who justifies the ungodly (4:5)—and so the justification of Abraham is the justification of an ungodly person. Abraham bears no special features that set him apart from the rest of humanity; rather, he belongs in the set of people who are unrighteous (3:10) unless justified by God. The fact that Paul places Abraham's faith in contrast to works (so that Abraham's justification by faith is distinguished from anything Abraham may have done in order to be worthy of justification) drives home the point (4:4–5). Neither Abraham's name, nor his nature, nor any actions can be called up to make sense of his justification, but only the faith elicited by God's promise. If Philo could find some fit between God's grace and Abraham's nature, Paul denies it. Indeed, to consider Abraham's worth would lead not to grace but wrath upon a Chaldean idolater (Rom 1:18; cf. Josh 24:2).

Paul's argument is similar with Jacob and Esau. Where Philo jumped from their prenatal state to their future actions to make sense of God's blessing, Paul says that God chose Jacob in the womb precisely so that his election would be before they had "done anything good or bad" (9:11). God's election is "not by works but by him who calls" (9:12). If we want to explain Jacob's election, we cannot turn to his works or worth, but only to God's initiative, his "purpose of election" (9:11). It's on this very basis that Paul goes on to make sense of how the Gentiles get brought into the church: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one" (Rom 9:25; Hos 2:23). This



is a God who takes the unworthy, those who are "not my people" and "not my loved one," and in his electing mercy makes them "my people" and "children of the living God" (Rom 9:26; Hos 1:10). It's this same mercy that has been at work throughout Israel's history to the present today.

Philo had to find a rationale for God's actions, especially his gift-giving and mercy. Whether it was a person's name, virtues, or even future actions, there is always a humanly explicable logic for what God does—always something we can point to in the human to explain God's mercy. Paul's argument runs the opposite way: nothing in the human makes sense of God's mercy; indeed, God could seem foolish in the kind of people he chooses to love, bless, and call his own. Paul knows that his argument makes God seem arbitrary, potentially even capricious: "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" But Paul's answer is a resounding, "Not at all!" (9:14). Philo would've been quick to call Paul's God irrational. But Paul proclaims the cross of Christ as the very thing that overturns human reason (cf. 1 Cor 1:18ff.). For Paul, if we want to understand God's mercy, we can

only look to God's own character, will, and purpose—what he has revealed to us. And what God has revealed to us is that his loving purpose is seen most clearly in Christ's death and resurrection specifically for the ungodly (3:21–26; 5:6–8; 10:1–17). Both Philo and Paul believed God was gracious and merciful; but for Philo his mercy must be explicable from the human side, while for Paul his mercy is inexplicable from our end because it depends only on God's will to be merciful. Human worth—any human characteristic—fails to qualify God's mercy, which can only be explained by recourse to the God who "has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32).

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Philo and Paul represent two drastically different ways of thinking about who God is and who we are before God. The distinction is worth considering, because the human temptation is always to follow Philo: to try to find a reason for God's mercy or blessing in the quality of a person. We may do without the allegorizing and philosophizing, even without much awareness that we're doing it, but in our hearts we are by nature more Philo than Paul.

I was leading a Bible study at my church recently when I threw out the question: Why did God choose Abraham? One of my most mature, biblically astute parishioners answered: "He must have been able to see the kind of faithfulness Abraham would have in his life." Heads nodded all around the room. And I understood why. Even if life has beaten the tar out of us and God's grace has taken hold, we will still be tempted to find the motivation for God's mercy in us: which means that it will be, in some measure, safe in our control—comprehensible. We want to think that God's mercy in some way or another depends on us. Few Christians I know would outright say that human worth—in one form or another—is a condition for God's mercy. And yet, there must be some reason for it. Without that explanation, how can we make sense of it?

But Paul teaches us to understand that God's mercy depends on us not a whit—not our name, nature, virtues, actions, social standing, or any other feature of our existence. Indeed, we can't even understand God's mercy (11:33), much less have any of us done anything to prompt his generosity (11:35). Paul's logic leads us to turn away from ourselves and to look to Jesus instead. In Jesus you see that you can trust the character of the one who gives mercy. We see that we are the enemy, the sinner, the ungodly for whom Jesus died, so we have confidence not just of God's love now, but also in the future, because God's mercy is always directed towards those who are specifically not worthy of it (5:6–11).

The question lies before us every day: Do we rely on our own character for God's mercy—or lean on God's character alone? If we follow Paul, we can be confident in the kind of God we will get: the one we see in Jesus Christ. To go down this path, we lose—or, at least, feel like we lose—control, but we receive a grace and mercy not conditioned by our worth, indeed, given to us apart from any worth on our part. Only by losing control and looking to Jesus alone can it be good news to hear, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy."

By Kelsey Marden

Look for the Helpers

You're not alone if you avoid the news before your morning cup of coffee—recent years have brought particularly heartbreaking headlines. In Ukraine, we've seen a war that's caused the largest and fastest displacement crisis in Europe since World War II; in Afghanistan, a government takeover that's set back women's rights at least 20 years; in Syria, a devastating earthquake where 12 years of conflict has already decimated its healthcare system and sent 15 million people spiraling into humanitarian need; and a cost-of-living crisis echoed worldwide. I know all this not so much because I keep up with the news on the regular, but because I read and write stories of refugees and displaced people whom my colleagues from the International Rescue Committee work with every day.

When I first joined the IRC, I was having nightmares about crowds of people attempting to escape Afghanistan. Several months later, when the conflict in Ukraine escalated, the nightmares began again. I struggled as our team collected and produced so many stories of people who, even still, haven't been helped. New mothers fleeing the country with newborns were forced to leave their husbands behind. Families were separated. People were at a loss for what to do or where to go. I remember one particular night I woke up to an intense thunderstorm thinking that DC, where I live, was being bombed.

I realized that war, earthquakes, droughts, and famine show no mercy to whoever is in their wake. They spare no one. And this is what regurgitates some of my toughest life questions: Where is God in the midst of the war in Ukraine? Or the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan? Or the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Turkey and neighboring countries while families were still asleep in their beds?

This is what led me to the stories you're about to read. In an attempt to expand my own understanding of God's mercy in the midst of these horrific tragedies, I interviewed several of my colleagues at the IRC—a humanitarian organization that helps people affected by some of the world's worst crises to survive, recover, and rebuild their lives.

All of them have either been face-to-face with these tragedies or have had to deal with the fast and hard facts on the other

end of them. What I learned is that my colleagues have been chewing on these questions enough to come up with some pretty thought-provoking answers.

And, somehow, they all turned out to be unanimous.

Helper Number One:
ELIAS ABU ATA

A lot can happen in 90 seconds. Recently, in Turkey and neighboring countries, it took 90 seconds for families to lose their homes, their entire belongings, and—for many—their loved ones.

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck in the early morning of Monday, February 6, killed 50,000 people, injured more than 120,000, and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes. For Syria, this was all happening on top of a 12-year armed conflict that's already displaced more than 12 million people, some as many as 20 times.

When Elias Abu Ata, the IRC's regional senior communications and media manager in the Middle East and North Africa, went to the region to cover the stories of families affected, he found them to be some of the most challenging he's faced. "You try to put yourself in their shoes and to imagine that you're waking up at 4:00 in the morning—and obviously you're in your sleepwear, you're in your bed—and suddenly you feel like the whole world is shaking," Elias said. "It's not just the earth, not just the ground. Everything is shaking. And that's what our staff told me when I spoke with them. They said it really felt like doomsday. It was Judgment Day. We've never experienced anything like this."

The region felt more than 13,000 aftershocks. Elias remembers his own experience of a few of them, one being a 6.2 magnitude aftershock. "I do remember quite vividly that that night, I did not sleep well," Elias said. "I kept waking up. My heart was beating fast the whole night—I was just on edge waiting for something to happen so I could run with my backpack and get out of that building…. Once I experienced that myself, I could begin to imagine what it was like for those people who actually lived those first 90 seconds."

Elias had the privilege of time to think about what to pack. Most did not. Instead, they had only a small window during which to grab their children, ensure their spouse or their parents were with them, and find safer ground. There was no time, nor desire, to think about the cash and civil documents they would need in the future. Families then moved into tents and stayed there, either because their homes were completely destroyed or they were too terrified to go back inside.

I asked Elias what, if anything, gives him hope when he witnesses these tragic events firsthand. He gave the same response as everyone else you'll meet in these pages. First, God. And second, the people.

"For me as a Christian, I can obviously go back to my faith," he said. "Mercy is constantly associated with God and with Jesus. And if there's love, there's mercy. But obviously, people who are caught up in a conflict, whether it's an armed conflict or a natural disaster, there's no mercy falling on them. But I think humanitarians can be an act of mercy for these people. In my work, I'm able to witness the impact of the IRC on the ground in terms of the assistance that we've provided within the first 48 hours."

Not only is Elias inspired by watching hu-

manitarians deliver aid, lifesaving medical care, and psychosocial support for families to recover from trauma, but also by seeing the resilience and hope in the people affected. A family in Northern Syria particularly inspired him. In 90 seconds, their home was reduced to rubble. After that, anything that shook triggered the same trauma, as if the world never had stopped shaking. Yet a few weeks later, they still prepared to observe Ramadan, a month to reflect, fast, and worship together.

"Just to see them a few weeks later, now as they prepare for Ramadan, to see the resilience, to see them hopeful for their child while living in a tent—which is not ideal after you've been living in a relatively decent home—you can clearly see that there is still hope in these people and they're able to stand up and continue. You're seeing the devastation, but then you can still see they're able to smile and say, Happy Ramadan. That's another reason for me to continue what I do and to have hope. They've seen so much devastation, yet they still manage to smile. They still manage to hold onto their hope for a better future."

Helper Number Two:
DEREK LEE

Derek is a numbers guy. He looks at humanitarian programs and assesses what's working, and what's not. But in his work he's discovered how his computer screen can easily become a shield from the world's biggest problems. Responding to crisis after crisis without any sign of slowing down starts to get repetitive. He also found himself struggling with the theology and prayers he's heard in church.

James from the IRC cares for 2-year-old Peter who received treatment from the IRC's nutrition program in Northern Bahr El Ghazal, South Sudan. ©The International Rescue Committee Photo: Adrienne Surprenant for the IRC.

"If you're in humanitarian work long enough," he told me, "you start to question a lot of American theology: things like, 'You have to trust that you're going to get your daily bread,' because having been abroad long enough, I know people who ended up not getting their daily bread and then starving to death. And I can even see from behind my computer screen that if we aren't treating 100 kids in a certain place, then we know statistically 20 of those kids will die. We know that's a reality in places that we're not working in, which is why we're trying to work in those places. And so the theology of 'God will always provide' is not necessarily there. And that was hard for me to confront. But the part of what strengthened me, and why I do the work that I do, is understanding that Jesus also laments. While I can't understand why certain tragedies happen, I can still trust that as much as I am feeling the tragedy and the pain of it, Jesus feels it all the more."

Throughout his career, Derek has worked for several humanitarian organizations, and he still struggles with the heavy things he witnessed. But after spending several years on what we would typically define as the "frontlines," Derek decided it was time to redefine frontline work when he asked himself what it would look like to participate in God's redemptive work if he was called to do something less glorious, yet still necessary?

For Derek, that answer became an Excel spreadsheet.

Being who he is, he loves when the numbers fit together—maybe even too much at times. "There's the other part of it that is almost dehumanizing on my spreadsheet. If I'm putting in like 6,000 or 8,000 or something, it's easy to get lost in the equation of it and not realize that this is also kind of also playing with people's lives."

What helped Derek humanize these numbers was his time spent at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin in 2021 as a part of the IRC's Afghanistan response. When he got there, the work he initially expected to do was very different from the work he had to do, and it was far more critical.

"Instead of filling out forms or something, I ended up leading a team that was checking all of the people who were going through the pipeline. We would be checking and finding so many errors a day. It was crazy. Ten minutes of Excel would immediately change someone's life for the better or for the worse. Because we'd be like, 'Oh, this person should not be going to Alaska because they're 80-years-old and only have one leg—they should maybe go here, where they have a family member and might be a lot better off.' It was important to work with names instead of just numbers."

This is why lament has become so important to Derek. Lament is not just a cry of pain. It can also be a spiritual practice, a tool to make sure we're grounded in reality. Without it, the numbers on Derek's computer screen become lifeless numerals again.

He told me, "The passage that grounds that emotion of lament is when Jesus heals Lazarus…. This is where that famous shortest verse comes in, where it says, 'Jesus wept.' And then the verse after that says the community looked at Jesus crying and said, 'Look how much he loved.' Then Jesus heals Lazarus. But Jesus goes to this town where Lazarus is dead already knowing that he's going to heal Lazarus because he's God. He knows what he's about to do, but he weeps anyway. That's been my grounding verse in the work that we do—that we can take time to cry even when we know good

things will happen. We know that we're going to go into this town to treat kids for malnutrition, with an almost 99 percent success rate. But lament is part of caring for the community. In the Lazarus story, what changed onlookers' lives, as much as seeing someone raised from the dead, was seeing Jesus weep. I think that compassion is what is longer lasting."

Helper Number Three:
VERA LEUNG

When the world moves on while people continue to suffer in the wake of disaster, it's heartbreaking. This is what Vera Leung, a creative director who's worked in the humanitarian space for more than 10 years, has had to battle against. It's her job to sit with people's hard stories and then try to make other people care when their attention is constantly being pulled away.

"We're trying to call attention to these stories," Vera said. "I think about how long there's been famine or drought in East Africa, like years of that, and the world still moves on very quickly, but there are still human beings feeling the impact of this over years. Same with the war in Ukraine and same with Afghanistan. People in Afghanistan are having to adjust the way in which they live, yet the world moves on constantly from these big topics."

When Vera visited a refugee camp in Kenya in 2022 and spoke with refugees who've spent their entire lives there, she questioned for the first time if there may not even be a solution. "These are settlements where people have spent a lifetime, where they were born and raised their own families," she said. "I just viscerally was like, Oh, is this ever going to shift or change? And what is the solution here? I couldn't fully see the end there. And I had to wrestle with, am I okay with not seeing the end and does that shift or change how I engage in the present? What if what we're called to do is to imagine just today and tomorrow? It's not necessarily hope deferred or hopelessness. It's hope in the moment."

What's giving Vera hope right now are the inspiring words from one of America's most beloved figures from our childhoods: "There is always somebody who's willing to show up. It's like that Fred Rogers quote about looking for the helpers. When we look for the helpers, they're truly always there, in either really small ways or big ways. And I feel like that can also mean looking inwards. Where am I? When can I be the helper? You're never truly alone in anything."

For Vera, these helpers are closely tied to how she sees God working in the midst of some of the world's worst crises. "I see God at work in places that are very close to a crisis—in the ways the surrounding and immediate community is deployed, how they show up to look for survivors, or to bring supplies or things that are needed. People who open up their homes, who make sure people feel safe where they are. In that situation, community is everybody from your neighbors, to local organizations, to emergency response units. All of these people are showing up in that moment to physically ensure their neighbors are safe and supported. I also see God showing up in the miraculous ways that people survive these crises. I feel like, in the same way that a crisis can seem like 'an act of God,' the survival of people through it is also an act of God."

Helper Number Four:
BRIANNA RAPP

From serving exploited women in the Philippines to sitting with young boys once enslaved in Ghana's fishing industry on Lake Volta, Brianna Rapp has seen a lot in her career as a producer, photographer, and missionary for several different humanitarian organizations. For Brianna, mercy and justice work hand in hand. You can't have peace without justice. And you can't have mercy without relief.

"I see mercy as relieving people of their circumstances," Brianna said. "Even thinking more in terms of sin, God relieves people and loosens up the grip of sin on us even though we don't deserve it. I think God is really kind to partner with his people and I even feel like I see his mercy in letting us be vessels of that mercy. Getting to see all my colleagues that I've worked with across the world, seeing them work as counselors or first responders—ultimately that's God's relief coming through his people."

Bri has especially seen this during her time in the Philippines. There she witnessed social workers spending their days advocating for young women and children who'd been exploited in the commercial sex trade. "When I think of the social workers I met, I realize their quality of life has been diminished, even just from the amount of time that they have to spend driving to work. They drive with their clients to the court—and getting there can take several hours—only to show up and then the judge tells them, 'It's my birthday. I'm not working today. You have to come back in three months.' It's tiring and it's exhausting. Yet because this is the one client they're advocating for, they're not going to walk away. And the Lord's like that with us, too. He's not going to abandon us when things get hard."

One of the things that has brought Bri the most hope is the relationships she's built with survivors. One boy's story still brings her to tears. When Gideon was rescued off of Lake Volta, he didn't count his blessings and call it a day. Instead, he asked to go back to where he had been enslaved, because he couldn't leave his friends behind.

"He wasn't scared to go back into the darkness. He went back to where those perpetrators were to get his friends—he was not going to leave them behind. Seeing him continue to advocate for all of those enslaved—that's what gives me hope. Those who've overcome what's been against them, how God has lifted them out, and now they do the same for those who are still caught up in this darkness. You see that in so many stories, every day. And so that's what gives me hope."

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So, next time you open your email bracing yourself for the next batch of scary news, like Fred Rogers says, "Look for the helpers."

Look for the women leading mobile health teams who are risking their lives to reach other women in Afghanistan with lifesaving healthcare they wouldn't otherwise receive. Look for the people at Arizona State University who welcomed three young Afghan women to their campus after the Taliban closed all of Afghanistan's campus doors to them. Look for the passionate dance instructor in a Ukrainian women's center who is helping women heal from the trauma of war through movement and dance. Look for Elias Abu Ata. Vera Leung. Derek Lee. Brianna Rapp. Not only will you always find the helpers, but you will always find God's mercy. Even in tragedy, it is there.

On Our Bookshelf

About Mercy

Book of Mercy

By Leonard Cohen

Leonard Cohen is revered as one of the great writers, performers, and most consistently daring artists of our time, and a favorite of us Mockingbirds. Originally published thirty-five years ago, these poems—contemporary psalms, really—brim with praise, despair, anger, doubt, and trust. Speaking from the heart of the modern world, yet in tones that resonate with an older devotional tradition, these verses give voice to our deepest spiritual hopes and fears.

How to Stay Married

By Harrison Scott Key

How should a professional humorist handle the revelation of his wife's infidelity? Tell some jokes, embark on a spiritual quest—all the usual. Hilarious, down-to-earth, and most of all moving, *How to Stay Married* is "a wild Pilgrim's Progress through the hellscape of marriage and the mysteries of mercy."

Help, Thanks, Wow

By Anne Lamott

Mercy doesn't only reveal itself in court rooms, doctor's offices, and battlefields. Mercy lights up grocery store checkout lines, red stoplights, and walks around the block. It is this everyday, quotidian

mercy that Anne Lamott has so winsomely schooled us in for decades. "Gorgeous, amazing things come into our lives when we are paying attention: mangoes, grandnieces, Bach, ponds. This happens more often when we have as little expectation as possible." *Help, Thanks, Wow* reminds us that prayer can be simple, and answers to prayer can be surprising.

Seventy Times Seven

By Alex Mar

Alex Mar's research into the brutal death of Ruth Pelke at the hands of teenager Paula Cooper uncovers a story of one man's miraculous change of heart, which becomes a catalyst for change in hearts and minds across the world. *Seventy Times Seven* recalls more than a vision of divine mercy—it also explores how moral injunctions to forgive can be flippant in the face of the world's overwhelming tragedies, and the kind of low anthropology required to advocate for the worst among us. A secular argument that grace is, ultimately, worth the cost.

How Far to the Promised Land

By Esau McCaulley

In this profound and moving memoir, McCaulley reflects on his and his family's struggle with poverty and racism in the American South. Far more than a rags-to-riches tale or a story of personal conquest through grit and determination, *How Far to the Promised Land* vividly illustrates the injustices and hardships of racism and the merciful providence of God through it all.

Dead Man Walking

By Sister Helen Prejean

Three decades after its publication, this story—which has inspired a film, a stage play, an opera, and an album—is more gut-wrenching than ever, stirring deep and life-changing reflection. Centered around the last months of Patrick Sonnier, who had been sentenced to death in the electric chair of the Angola State Prison, this story by Roman Catholic nun Sr. Helen Prejean is a moving spiritual journey through the United States' system of capital punishment. Motivated by the Christian imperatives of love and mercy, Prejean accompanies Sonnier through his last days, learns of his fear of death, and counsels him through his guilt and grief while also confronting the rage of the bereaved.

Just Mercy

By Bryan Stevenson

After all the awards and accolades it has received, this rousing memoir by the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative hardly needs more commendations. They made a movie about it, after all. But it is an incredibly powerful read. While Stevenson recounts many of the most notable cases in his decades of work defending marginalized clients in the criminal justice system, he spends the most ink documenting his painstaking efforts to overturn the wrongful conviction of longtime death row inmate

Walter McMillian. In the end, Stevenson explains, Walter "taught me that mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving."

Etc.

Trains, Jesus, and Murder

By Richard Beck

A wonderful book that explores the themes and theological underpinnings of Johnny Cash's music. Cash is so beloved and venerated, I was leery of this book, but Beck delivers the goods. For anyone who loves Cash this is an admirable guide into the cathedral of his lyrics that amplifies their power. The "Man in Black" was more of a gospel singer than Elvis ever could be.

Why Am I Like This?

By Kobe Campbell

Those familiar with her social media presence will not be surprised to discover that Campbell has brought the same empathy, wisdom, and flair to her first book. If this is your first exposure, get ready for a deft and highly pastoral guide to the intersection of therapy and theology—the kind that doesn't devalue either discipline. Bringing to bear a wealth of scripture, clinical experience, and personal testimony, Campbell sensitively dispels destructive misunderstandings of mental health, while illuminating the many paths God takes us on toward healing. We are so excited that she has agreed to join us at our 2024 NYC Conference.

The Nicene Creed

By Phillip Cary

This lucid and (mercifully!) brief guide to the Nicene Creed outlines its origins, offers a close study of the text(s) of the creed, and demonstrates why this ancient summary of faith continues to be good news. But perhaps most significantly, Cary connects every article of the creed with its scriptural antecedents to collectively show how this confession of faith functions as a summary of and commentary on the Bible.

Birnam Wood

By Eleanor Catton

In Catton's new literary thriller, there is none righteous, no, not one. The story of a guerilla gardening group that gets entangled with a billionaire, this novel's every character seeks right action and rationalizes their increasingly bad decisions until eventually they become uniquely tyrannical, a Macbeth to someone else's Duncan. Francis Spufford noted that "If George Eliot had written a thriller, it might have been a bit like this."

The Anxiety Opportunity

By Curtis Chang

In which the co-host of the popular *Good Faith* podcast delves into a subject close to his own worried heart and comes up with more than a few lifelines for the anxious among us (translation: everyone). While Chang re-

fuses to over-spiritualize his subject, he thankfully doesn't under-spiritualize it either, drawing assuredly on both Scripture and pastoral experience without ignoring the science. This short book won't 'fix' anyone's anxiety, nor does it claim to, but it will go a long way toward helpfully reframing it. The second half—from the introduction of the Anxiety Formula onward—boasts freshness, with the emphasis on eternity being a surprisingly welcome turn.

It Was an Ugly Couch Anyway

By Elizabeth Passarella

In her second book of personal essays, Passarella again puts a lie to the notion that writing about the Christian life can't be hilarious (or honest!). Middle age, career, kids, marriage, health, real estate—it's all here, presented with a journalist's eye for detail, a humorist's ear for punchlines, and a believer's heart for grace. Come for the wry observations about the struggle to get by as a family in the big city; stay for the hard-won wisdom about the nature of help and hope.

When Church Stops Working

By Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand

If you only have time for one book about church decline, this is the one. A user-friendly distillation of Root's *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, this short volume manages to avoid both the sky-is-falling and the head-in-the-sand rhetoric that mars so much writing on this topic. Root and Bertrand synthesize the insights of Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa in ways that are imminently readable and refreshingly vertical. Those looking to go deeper should check out Root's *The Congregation in a Secular Age*. Incisive stuff.

Lessons and Carols

By John West

Lessons and Carols is a genre-bending memoir that examines the aftershocks of alcoholism and mental illness through the lenses of poetry, ritual, and community. Echoing the form of a traditional Anglican Christmas service of stories and songs, John West's lyrical prose invites readers to participate in the recital of an unorthodox rendition of the liturgy called Lessons and Carols. Each December, a faithful circle of irreligious friends assembles to eat and sing and reimagine an old story about love made flesh. In that gathering's glow, resentments turn to quiet wonder at the ways a better world can appear.

Mercy at the Movies

By Meaghan Ritchey

Ten Films That Flip the Script

Spanning almost a century of cinema, this list of films maps a world—real and imagined—devoid of the mercy for which we all have need, as well as a world animated by unexpected and unearned mercies, flipping the script and leaving the plot forever changed. In no particular order, and far from exhaustive:

1. Rust and Bone (2012)

Adapted from Craig Davidson's short story collection by the same name, this romantic drama, starring Marion Cotillard and Matthias Schoenaerts, tells the unusual love story of Ali, a destitute single father; and Stephanie, a marine park whale trainer who becomes an amputee after an orca crushes her legs during a performance. As their relationship moves from casual to committed, Ali and Stephanie are met with a love so unexpected and strangely specific to their needs that their damaged souls begin to heal, and together they experience the strange mercy of companionship in a cruel and absurd world.

2. Of Gods and Men (2010)

In 1996, during the gruesome, protracted Algerian Civil War, a conflict between Islamic fundamentalists and the Algerian government, seven Trappist monks were assassinated in their home at the Tibhirine Monastery. Until then this group of Christian brothers had lived quietly and peacefully with their Muslim neighbors, offering medical care and other acts of service to the village, even selling honey in the market. As the war worsens, through their daily prayers confession, the viewer is let in on the monks' very real fear of death. And while martyrdom is not part of the Cistercian creed, Jesus' call to love their enemies—a self-denying mercy that would ultimately cost them their lives—is.

3. Tender Mercies (1983)

Country singer Mac Sledge (Robert Duvall) is a beleaguered, twice-divorced alcoholic whose life has become defined by his disappointments. One morning, after a boozy evening out, he wakes up in the Texas Panhandle's Mariposa Hotel, managed by Rosa Lee (Tess Harper), a single mother and widow whose husband was killed in Vietnam, who has given her life entirely to her son and the Baptist church where she sings in the choir. In exchange for a place to crash, Mac volunteers to stay there and work as a handyman. The two fall in love without much flare, but it's through this tender mercy of a happenstance romance that Mac, Rosa Lee, and Sonny, her son, light the shadows of their pasts.

4. Joyeux Noël (2005)

Joyeux Noël is a fictionalized account of one of history's most surprising events. In December 1914, amid the devastation of WWI, an unofficial truce occurred in the hellish trenches between German, French, and Scottish soldiers. Astonishingly, for a short time, the mercy of Christmas prevailed over the horrors of trenches, and friendship, mercy, camaraderie, and joy silenced gunfire.

5. Love & Mercy: The Brian Wilson Story (2014)

Brian Wilson's life is a strange harmony of torture met with triumph, suffering met with song, and eccentricity met with electricity. This biopic splits the role of Wilson, with Paul Dano playing his childhood and early days with the Beach Boys, specifically the production of the epic *Pet Sounds* album, and John Cusack playing him in middle age, when he was receiving abusive treatment by Dr. Eugene Landy under the guise of mental illness. Amid this torture, he meets Melinda Ledbetter (Elizabeth Banks), a Cadillac saleswoman who will become his second wife, and is the embodiment of mercy in her dealings with Brian.

6. The Elephant Man (1980)

Shot in vivid black-and-white film, David Lynch's second-ever feature is the story of English surgeon Frederick Treves' (Anthony Hopkins) friendship with an ostracized freak-show performer named John Merrick (John Hurt), who has severe skeletal and soft-tissue deformities. While most spectators assume that John's physical appearance must be coupled with an intellectual disability, John and Frederick's deep friendship reveals the opposite. Their conversations become a space of profound compassion, introspection, and beauty, revealing the prideful arrogance of quick superficial judgements and the mercy of a friendship born out of open-eyed acceptance.

7. Short Term 12 (2013)

Short Term 12 is set in a foster care ward in southern California providing care to a ragtag group of at-risk teens whose troubles include cutting, drug addiction, and depression. Their chief caretaker is Grace (Brie Larson), formerly a troubled teen herself, who hopes to guide them on less rocky paths. Here Grace's mercy takes the form of enforcing a steady routine, offering a listening ear, and relentless pursuing when the teens try to run away, literally chasing a "runner" who tries to escape.

8. It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

On Christmas Eve, 1945, prayers were heard in heaven for George Bailey of Bedford Falls, NY. Clarence Oddbody, an angel who has not yet earned his wings, is sent to earth to keep George from killing himself. George says he wishes that he had never been born, and Clarence grants his wish, but it doesn't end there. Together they rehearse crucial moments in George's life that would have been disastrous if he'd not been born, from a childhood moment where he saves his drowning brother, to the time when he stopped Mr. Gower, a local drug storeman, from accidentally dispensing arsenic tablets. Finally, presented with this evidence and unable to face what might have been, George begs to live and discovers that his wish is mercifully granted just in time for Christmas.

9. Spirited Away (2001)

Spirited Away, one of Hayao Miyazaki's most celebrated masterworks, is regarded as one of the best animated films ever made. The film is the coming-of-age story of a ten-year-old Japanese girl named Chihiro who, when we first meet her, is despondent about her family's decision to move to a new home. Like in an *Alice in Wonderland* trip through the looking glass, her family stumbles across a mysterious tunnel in the middle of the forest, leading to a magical bathhouse run by Yubaba, a cruel witch. With a courageous spirit of compassion and mercy, Chihiro rescues her parents who've turned into pigs, and eludes capture by a sinister stalker called No Face, winning her battle with a spirit of charity instead of the obvious super tropes.

10. Dead Man Walking (1995)

Starring Susan Sarandon as Sr. Helen Prejean, a nun working with inmates on death row, and Sean Penn as Matthew Poncelet, an inmate who is a few months from his execution, *Dead Man Walking* confronts the complexity of crime and punishment, guilt and grace. Avoiding the tropes of Hollywood in a way only the truest stories can, mercy doesn't bear itself out in a tidy way: Matthew is executed, his victim's family does not forgive him, nor does he have some sort of deathbed conversation. And yet mercy animates the whole film in the person of Sr. Helen, who experiences all the complexities, contradictions, and hard truths of the situation, and without reservation gives Poncelet every chance to repent.

Shantel Miller, *Forgiveness*, 2021. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Interview

WITH
Robert Leon Davis

The Fugitive Comes Home

If God can save Robert Leon Davis, then God can save anybody. Just ask Mr. Davis himself. In his 2010 autobiography *Running Scared*,[1] he recounts his involvement in any number of criminal enterprises. After becoming a police officer in the mid-70s, he used his power to extort sex from women he arrested. Then, after being arrested himself in 1979, he fled justice and spent the next twenty-two years on the run, often living in the woods, and continuing to make money through dubious means—as a prolific car thief, an enforcer for the Crips gang, and a gigolo. Along the way, he fathered five children and left a trail of broken hearts and broken families. He deceived and stole from the people that treated him well. All the while, he hated and cursed the God he no longer believed in, and loved to let people know it.

But God wasn't done with Robert Leon Davis. As Davis puts it, "I found God, or rather he found me." Hearing his remarkable story, you almost imagine him being stalked every step of the way, as if by Francis Thompson's "Hound Of Heaven"—fleeing Him "down the nights and down the days … down the labyrinthine ways" until at last coming face to face with the reality that "All things betray thee, who betrayest

1. Mr. Davis wanted us to emphasize that, since its publication, all the profits from his book sales have been donated to women's abuse centers. "True forgiveness is enough," he said.

Me." Having perfected the art of living on the lam, Davis was finally "busted" by God, who rattled his cage like an earthquake over a few days in 2001, somewhere in the woods outside Memphis, and sent him down a new life path. At once, Davis returned home to New Orleans and turned himself in, knowing he faced a lengthy prison sentence.

Yet amazingly, at the conclusion of proceedings, the judge trying Davis' case *suspended* his sentence, allowing him to reenter society as a free man. In the years since this act of mercy, Davis has continued to live in New Orleans, teaching classes for the NOPD, mentoring young men as a personal trainer, and trying to make up for lost time with family. His story is one that recalls what Graham Greene called "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God," and Mr. Davis hasn't stopped thanking God and spreading word of his grace ever since. He recently spoke to Mockingbird about the many strange mercies replete in his winding journey homeward.

— Benjamin Self, interviewer

Mockingbird

Mr. Davis, you were raised by your grandmother in the notorious Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans, right? Just how poor were you?

Robert Leon Davis

We're talkin' dirt poor. We're talking about an old lady trying to support nine kids on a Social Security check of about $250 a month. We made it through, but it was a rough life, man.

M

I know you were involved in criminal activity as a minor, but then as a teenager you connected with these two older guys who were cops. It was because of them that you ended up going to the police academy.

RLD

Yeah. When I first went to the police academy, I just took it as a dare, as a challenge, but I excelled at it actually. I wound up winning the physical fitness award.

M

So you started work as a police officer in 1975, and it seemed like your life was heading in a good direction. How did it all go south?

RLD

Well, once I got on the force, I decided I really did want to be a cop—a good cop. But the NOPD at that time was so crooked. When I got out of the academy, I was trying to do good and made a complaint about another officer's inappropriate conduct. I was told, by my commander, "Look,

this is how it is. I can send your complaint up to headquarters, but then no officer will want to ride with you or anything. Or I can throw this in the trash can." And when you're a 20-year-old officer, and you got a 47-year-old commander telling you something like that, you listen. You join the club. So that's what happened, I just kind of joined the club, you know? It wasn't the right thing to do, but that's what I did.

M

At one point in your book, you say, "A visitor to the city is more likely to be attacked by an officer than a criminal." That might be an exaggeration, but still, that's scary.

RLD

It's systemic. It was in the culture of the force. I do classes at the NOPD academy now. The only way they started to clean it up is when they got outside police chiefs.

M

So, a couple years into your job as a police officer, you had this experience where you were with a partner and he pulled someone over, a young woman, and tried to make a trade with her—basically sex for citations. And you decided to go along with it.

RLD

Yeah, we did that.

M

And that was just the beginning. You started doing that regularly, abusing your power for sex. But it was interesting, some of the things you said to yourself as justifications are familiar to all of us: Everybody is doing it. Or, it doesn't matter as long as you don't get caught.

RLD

Yeah, that's exactly what it was for me. The most profound thing in my thinking at that time was atheism. My mom and grandmother were churchgoing people, but I really turned my back on all that. I just didn't care, man. When you're an atheist, you have nothing to answer to except yourself. You're not subject to any law. It's carnal. It's cutthroat.

M

But eventually you did get caught. In 1979, you were arrested in a sting operation for extorting sex, and you realized that you were a "dead man."

RLD

I knew I was done. It was a very surreal moment: You go home after getting bonded out of jail and everybody's outside waiting to look at you. You can't come outside, even to throw the garbage away. It was devastating and embarrassing for my family—I had eight siblings. You can't turn on the TV, because the local news has stories about you. Some of my heaviest crying was in that apartment, just sitting there thinking about my life. I was mourning.

The only good thing that happened to me at that time was that my grandmother had passed away a few months before I got caught. I was very relieved by that, because I didn't want her to see what happened to me.

M

So, while waiting for trial, you decided to make a run for it—instead of going to prison. You got organized, gathered supplies, and you fled New Orleans to Toronto, Canada. Amazingly, your wife, Candace, came with you. She stuck with you on the run, at least for a while.

RLD

Yeah, she did. But reality soon kicked in for her. She was a nurse and she couldn't fulfill her vocation anymore up in Canada. She was out there in the cold selling flowers for commission, while I was making money stealing cars and selling them for parts.

M

It was in Toronto where you decided once and for all that you were an atheist, right?

RLD

Pretty much. I started reading atheistic philosophy in the library and I used to attend atheist classes once a week. I eventually got to the point where I hated God, I hated the very idea of God. I literally used to go around and key cars that had bumper stickers that were Christian-oriented. I was a strict, strict atheist.

M

But then of course, Candace started leaving all these little religious pamphlets and messages around the apartment for you.

RLD

Oh man, I hated that. The first day she left a message that said "Jesus Loves, Jesus Saves" on the carpet outside our apartment, and I was like *Oh, please*. I think that was the thing that finally busted us up. She was just as much into the Lord as I was into atheism, and she started to see that that was something I wasn't going to gravitate towards, so she decided to leave. But I was kind of glad that she left because it's better to be on your own in that situation.

I had to leave Toronto though. I thought she might turn me in when she got back to New Orleans, so I got the hell out. Like the next day.

M

Eventually, after some time in Montreal, you decided that you wanted to go live in the woods, full-time. You started immersing yourself in wilderness survival literature and you picked out Gatineau Park—a forest outside of Ottawa—as a place to live.

RLD

Yeah, it's a beautiful place. I still want to go back there as a free man. But it was bad at first. What I was in essence doing was trying to live completely apart from society. And even though I had studied the woods and wilderness survival, to actually get out there and do it is a different ball game. I soon realized that the loneliness was the hardest thing. Having no conversation, no love in life. I would lay back and look at the airplanes flying overhead and just imagine how these people were living. I just started thinking about all the stuff that I was missing, especially if it was around Mardi Gras.

I had a pistol with me and it got to a point where I contemplated suicide. Even though I didn't believe in God, I didn't do it because I think I had that type-A personality—I don't give up real easy. It's that will-to-live thing. I'm the kind of guy, when I want to do something, I do it. Eventually, I was able to make it in the woods, and the woods became home to me.

M

You didn't think of it this way in those days, but there were some subtle mercies that you received during your time in the woods.

RLD

I was able to do things in the woods that a normal person couldn't do. For instance, I spent time with four generations of birds.

There was a baby bird that fell out of a tree away from its mother. You talk about mercy in the elements! That bird fell out of the tree, and I climbed up and brought it back, but the mother was hesitant to come back because I was still in the tree. So I went back down. She went up into the tree, and then I crawled back up again. She would leave again, but I kept doing that because I had nothing else to do. This mama bird doesn't know I'm a fugitive—I got all the time in the world. And I did that so much that she became comfortable, so that when I got up to the top of the tree to the nest, I was even able to stroke her and the two baby birds, the one that fell out and one that didn't.

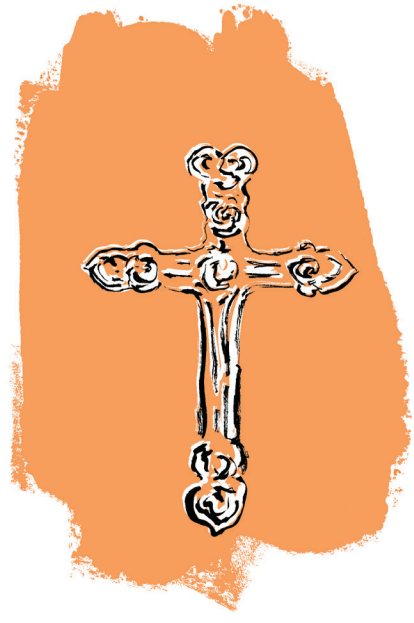
It got to the point that those little birds—once they were on their own—visited me at my camp. And you could tell they were birds that knew me because they had no fear of me. One of them was a girl and one was a boy. I saw the girl bird fly back in the same tree, much higher up, and I was eventually able to climb up there and do the same thing with her babies. That happened four times through four generations!

M

They became like your surrogate family.

RLD

Yes! It was the only thing stopping me from leaving Canada. When things got hot for me in Canada—I hated it—the thing that almost got me busted was those freaking birds. Because they were the only family I had. They were the only things that didn't know nothing about my past, didn't care about my past. That was mercy in nature, which is infused with God. I can distinctly remember: once my relationship started with those birds, I was able to make it in the



woods. Suicidal thoughts went by the way, because I'm thinking, in a weird way, if I commit suicide then who's going to watch out for the birds?

M

That's beautiful. It shows that no matter how isolated you are, God can still get to you.

RLD

He can touch your heart, man. He can touch your heart in a way that you never thought possible.

M

You definitely had a knack for surviving in the woods. You learned how to hunt and feed yourself through those Canadian winters. You defended yourself from wild animals, including, on one occasion, a wolverine. And you figured out how to collect safe drinking water.

RLD

Yeah, God gave me the intellect to figure all that out—that was a mercy, too. But, mind you, at the time I'm thinking that I'm the smart one. I wasn't going to give him no credit.

M

I thought it was interesting how you say that during that time you "disassociated [your]self from all feelings to do with love. [You] loved no one and felt no love from anyone," and that that was actually "a very tolerable situation."

RLD

You welcome it.

M

But to a lot of people that situation sounds like a prison, like hell. Right?

RLD

Well, I guess in a way it is a type of prison, but you got to keep in mind that everything is relative. When I went to my last hearing at court back in 1979—before I ran—a message came from Angola [Louisiana's state penitentiary] about what was in store for me. During the 70s, police officers weren't considered political prisoners. They put you in with the general population. So I knew what that meant for me: I was going to be raped and killed. So for me, living alone in the woods was luxury compared to where they would have sent me.

I've had a lot of guys now tell me: "I can't even stay two weeks in the woods. I don't know how you were able to do it that long." Well, if the threat outside of doing that is greater than doing it, you will either do it or die. And for me, I did it—God helped me do it.

M

Eventually, though, after a couple years in Gatineau, you started having some health issues.

RLD

Well, I was having eye problems. One of things you gotta have when you're hunting is vision. I couldn't see—everything was getting hazy. I really thought I had a brain tumor; it came out that all I had was an astigmatism. I just needed glasses. I did have to go back to the city, though. And once I did that, I decided to go back to America, where I met Father Clements.

M

In Chicago. That would have been 1982–85.

RLD

Oh yeah, I remember those years, man. I got two kids, a girl and a boy from those years. In '82, I had Tamara, and in '84, I had Bobby, Jr. Matter of fact, my son is a city councilman in Chicago. Anyway, that was a turning point for me being with Fr. Clements in Chicago. There was no father in my life—he didn't exist in any way or fashion—and so Fr. Clements kind of filled that void for me because he was older than I was.

M

When you arrived in Chicago and you knocked on the door of a Catholic church, he answered the door, and the first thing he did was buy you a $200 winter coat, right? Then he got you some glasses, and he gave you a job and a place to stay.

RLD

Haha, yeah. That freaked me out, I'm not going to lie. He did a whole lot of stuff for me,

man. You gotta keep in mind, this guy was a celebrity. He lived in a rectory and they had a big old dining room with a table that could accommodate like 20 people, and it did. He would have guests over every day and had me on his right hand side the whole time. All these actors and singers and politicians came, like Janet and Michael Jackson, Hal Washington, Jesse Jackson, all these bigwigs from Chicago. We'd go out to the store and people would be trying to get this guy's autograph, and I was right there with him. Man, it was wild. And he was the only one that I actually told my past to.

M

You really trusted him. But then, after several good years in Chicago, you developed a gambling habit, and to pay off your debts, you ended up stealing money from Fr. Clements. You cracked his safe, right?

RLD

Yeah. He's dead now, but he's still trying to figure out how I got in that safe.

M

Didn't you feel guilty?

RLD

I felt some guilt later, after I left. But when I actually did it, I didn't feel any guilt. I had to leave Chicago though.

It's funny, we met again decades later. Man, that was a weird day. I was back in New Orleans, a free man, and I saw on the news that he was in town. He probably thought I was still on the run. I remember, when I got to the hall where he was speaking, he had a lot of security there—you had to have an invitation, the state police and everybody was all over the place. I was trying to get in there, and so I told one of the little servers, I said, "Go in there and tell him that Robert Leon Davis is outside, like just whisper it in his ear. I guarantee that he will not only let me in but he will come out here and get me." And sure enough, two minutes later, Fr. Clements came running out of there. It was a great meeting.

M

After Chicago, you started to move around pretty regularly, every year or two. The next place you went was Memphis, where you met a woman named Veronica and had another child. Of course, that was the same kid you tried to get back in touch with much later on, right before you turned yourself in. In Memphis, you went back to stealing cars—at least until the guy you were working with got busted. But you hadn't really gone back to the woods yet.

RLD

Well, I was in and out. I would come back and forth from the city to the woods.

M

Then you ended up in Asheville, NC, and spent a while living in the Smokey's.

RLD

Yeah, two years. I loved it there. It's a beautiful place. I would have stayed there, except there's a lot of rangers that look out for forest fires, and they saw my smoke one evening. They're thinking it's a fire started by some lightning or something. But I was slipping that day. Actually, you know why I was slipping? I had made some moonshine, and I was tore up. That stuff hit me hard! I had gotten some berries and made the strongest moonshine you can imagine. I could never get that quite right again.

You may not know this, but my eating isn't that different from what it used to be. I still hunt and eat foods that I used to out in the woods. Last night for dinner I had possum. My family think I'm weird! There were a couple of things living in the wilderness caused me to struggle with later when I came back to society. One of the things I had a problem with initially in trying to establish a relationship with a woman was those wilderness habits, you know, in particular bathing. I've kind of conquered a lot of that now. But do you know I still don't sleep in my bed? I sleep on the sofa. And almost fully clothed. It's part of that don't-get-too-relaxed thing that I'm still getting over. I've got a nice king size bed, too. I probably sleep in my bed a month out of the year.

See, those wilderness habits were normal for me. What I essentially did was take an abnormal situation and then make it normal. I didn't fight against the elements, I went along with them.

M

Which is why you survived.

RLD

Exactly. Amongst my friends—things they worry about are nonsense to me.

M

Speaking of friendships, can you tell us about Lee? You met a lot of people on the road but you only developed a real connection with a few. You ended up loving him like a brother.

RLD

Oh yeah. You know, I still have hope today that one day he'll see something about me, if he's still out there. I actually used a private investigator to try to find him once. I had to use a PI twice. One was to try to find Lee and one was to try to find my youngest daughter—the one I had later in Miami. I was able to locate her, but I knew her last name. With Lee, I didn't know his real name. Lee was on the run like I was, and you don't share last names. I don't even really know if his first name was really Lee. But I always have some hope in my mind that one day, if he's living, we'll run across each other. He was a good guy.

When I think about Lee, I think about one thing—the thing that broke us off after living together for years—and that was this argument we had about God in the middle of the freaking woods. Can you imagine that?

M

It sounded like quite a knock-down-drag-out argument.

RLD

Oh yeah. Lee had become more of a Christian because he had left civilization. I had become less of a Christian. So when he starts saying stuff like "Oh God, what am I going to do?" and "Oh, Lord Jesus…"—I'm like, *I'm not trying to hear that!* I couldn't care less about Jesus. And that's what started the argument, when he started talking about spirit and all that.

M

If I recall, it started because he felt you were "too happy" about your circumstances and said that you "were both sinners and should be repenting." Did you feel like a sinner at that point?

RLD

You would've laughed. What really got to him was the day that he walked into my camp and I was sitting there lounging, like

I ain't got a worry in the world. And he's sitting up there reading the Bible. He was all upset and I'm living like King Solomon, you know? He just couldn't deal with that. That's what started it. He asked me, "Why aren't you on your knees praying?" The difference between me and him was that I had already lived a long life in the woods, and he hadn't, and it was taking a toll on him. I was already like, I'm chill, I'm good.

As long as we kept that topic of religion off the table, we were good. But once he put that on the table, that's when we fell out. And you have to remember, we had been together for a long time. We were like family.

M

How long did you guys travel together?

RLD

About three years. But keep in mind, in the beginning the conversations were mostly about survival—you know, catching the train, getting water, and all that. Then, once we got comfortable, we got into more personal stuff. I never questioned him about religion. I mean, I knew he was a Christian. It's just that he had an issue with me being comfortable in sin. You know? He was like, "Don't let the devil win, don't let the devil win!" And I was like, Man, I'm not trying to hear nothing about no devil, I'm just trying to enjoy my food!

M

You said something interesting to him: "I am an entity and a law unto myself. I serve no one but Robert." And yet, it didn't take very long for you to miss Lee and to wish that you were not alone again.

RLD

I regretted losing him. Had I known that it was going to get the point of him leaving, I would have never had that discussion because I valued our friendship as partners more than that. But keep in mind that wouldn't have been consistent with my arrogance at the time. I needed to be right. I needed to tear you down.

M

After that all went down with Lee, you said, "The subject of God seemed to be haunting me…wherever I went." Looking back, was that all part of how God was trying to reach you?

RLD

Yeah, that's what he was doing. He was reaching me through Lee, through all the girls that I dealt with—they were Christian already. Everything that I was involved in was a reminder that He was going to be here. Even when there were times when I would go to certain churches and try to use them for money, they'd want me to sit there and listen to this stupid stuff for 45 minutes to get a meal. It's like everywhere I went I had to deal with God, and that was very, very aggravating because each and every one of these instances where God was coming up, I'm thinking of my grandmother. I'm hearing my grandmother through the churches, through Lee. She's echoing in my conscience. She always said, "Do the right thing. Do the right thing."

M

Later, not long before you turned yourself in, you told another fugitive you met—a newbie—that he'd have to "give up his identity in its totality, lose all of his loved ones, and accept the reality that…anyone he loved or who loved him would also have to be held lightly and probably sacrificed for the sake of *freedom*." That's bleak. Do you understand freedom any differently today?

RLD

Well, for me, freedom is not just a physical thing now. Because I had physical freedom all those years, but I wasn't really free. That's what the judge said later: "You essentially served your time in prison, just in another kind of way." I think true freedom is not physical but it's being able to be in a place where you can serve your Creator. Freedom is a state of mind more than anything, because you can be free physically but living in mental jail and vice versa. And you know what made me understand that? Look at Jesus—do you know what it takes for you to sit there and you're a man and you can defend yourself, but you choose not to? That's powerful.

M

Would you say it was the vulnerability that you were experiencing that led you to your conversion and your healing?

RLD

Pretty much. You've got to be weak in order to be saved. If you're aggressive and bad like I was, you can't take advice, you can't take scripture, you can't take wisdom. The world's going to call you soft, but through weakness you get saved. You can listen. But when you're cocky, you're not trying to hear nothing. You think you got this.

M

When you first started out on the run in 1979, you thought you were invincible. But when you returned to Memphis in 2001, now 46 years old, you felt like you'd reached your limit. You said "the world was dull to me." You were struggling with suicidal thoughts again. Tell me about your mindset.

RLD

I'd been out there for a long time and I'd seen it all. I think a lot of those thoughts came from a relationship I'd had with a woman down in Miami named Monique,

who eventually had the daughter that I had to hire the PI to find. I just loved the mother and the child so much. But while I was soft with them, I was still hard with the world. And it got to a point where I was just kind of tired of it. So I just felt like giving up.

M

Back in the woods, you were at this point of total desolation. But then you had this incredibly vivid dream that involved your grandmother. That seemed like a big turning point.

RLD

It was. Dreams are a reality at the time you're having them. I dreamed about the little things, everything about my grandmother. I was dreaming about her sewing clothes for us as children. I dreamed about her cooking food. It was all like a throwback. And in the dream, I'm nothing like the man I was at the time I was having the dream—no, I'm *young* again, I'm good again, everything was well in my life. And I thought about my younger brothers and sisters. Because, remember, I hadn't seen them in decades.

M

As you describe in the book, at the end of your dream, your grandmother basically begs God to deliver her to Satan *rather than you.*

RLD

That's how she was. That's just the kind of love that she had. It shakes me up even today. She was saying in her soul, *leave him alone and take me*. It seemed real, and when I woke up I was in a strange place. I can't really describe it. I think that was God hitting on the accelerator with me. I think he said, "Okay, I've given this guy 20+ years out here wandering in the wilderness and I think I'm going to close it down—let's get this show rolling now."

M

You wrote, "The dream stirred something in me long forgotten." Was that the first time you started to think again that maybe you were a child of God?

RLD

Well, fleetingly. But coming out of it, what it really did was it made things worse for me. Because I had this glimpse in my dream of myself at a time when everything was okay, before I was a fugitive. So when I woke up, I felt kind of bad that things got to that point in my life that I had to have a dream about my grandmother sacrificing herself. It was a rough time. I was in a rough place.

M

So then, still in the woods, you started "testing" God. For example, you left your shoes out one night, and you told God that if he was real, there'd be a leaf in one shoe but not the other shoe the next morning. And there was.

RLD

Yeah, but keep in mind, when I'm doing these things I'm not really looking for an answer from God. I'm more poking fun at it all. I'm like, if there is a God, then let me see him do this. But I was just testing a theory.

M

And with each test, you're able to explain them away.

RLD

Exactly. Every time that God talks to us, the satanic spirit gives you a way out.

M

Right. But what about the third test?

RLD

Yeah, that was the last test. That was when everything became real. With that test, the object was heavier. I placed an upturned can on the ground and put a small stone next to it. And I said to myself, "if the stone is underneath the can in the morning, then God exists." The next morning, the stone was gone. I mean, I was so freaked out I didn't even look underneath the can. I didn't need to.

I know people that don't believe in miracles, don't believe in God, and for them that can still be explained away. Even my brothers, they mess with me sometimes—they say, "Why didn't you go look under the can?" But for me, there is no doubt. What happened happened.

M

You were terrified.

RLD

Yeah, I'm not dreaming no more! I'm wide awake. This is not a dream of my grandmother—I see this. And I know it was real because it's what prompted me to give myself up.

M

You basically lost control of your bodily functions.

RLD

Yes, man. I peed on myself.

M

And then, you immediately fled the woods—leaving your shoes behind. You walked all the way into downtown Memphis barefoot.

RLD

It wasn't like I meant to leave my shoes, I just forgot. I had to get to that telephone to call home. At that moment, I was ready. I was done. You gotta think, it's like an atheist that dies and goes to heaven and realizes there is a God. That's a hell of a situation.

It was shocking. I was like, "I've got to get up out of here." I hitched a freight train home to New Orleans. I wasn't trying to hustle no money, gather no bus tickets. I was done. And I never wavered in the whole sequence of events after that. Even when I first went back to court and was looking at 30 years in prison, I was done. I was like, okay, it is what it is.

M

Like you said, God did "what no one and nothing else could"—convince you to give yourself up.

RLD

Yeah. When I first left New Orleans in 1979, before I fully became an atheist, I used to say, "Lord, please don't ever let me get caught." And that's what he did. *I'm not going to let you get caught—you're gonna turn yourself in!* I just didn't know it at the time.

M

So you called your youngest sister Thecla from Memphis—the only one of your siblings that you knew you could find in the phonebook, because of her unusual name. Then you headed home.

RLD

She didn't even know who I was at first. She said, "Sir, you have the wrong number," and I had to convince her that I was her brother. When I left, she was like five years old. So

she'd heard about it and had some memories of me, but not much. I stayed with her for two or three days before I turned myself in.

M

And a bunch of your old family members came to see you?

RLD

Yeah, she had told everybody I was going to be there. And everybody was there, man. It was a very surreal moment, looking at all my brothers and sisters that I hadn't seen in so many years. There was a lot of crying, happy crying. It was deep. And my oldest son that I'd left when he was a baby was there too. He was 22 years old. That was deep.

M

It was like they'd all been waiting for you to come home.

RLD

That was a lot of mercy. And looking at my son's own child, my grandbaby—that was very moving. All that toughness and aggressiveness just kind of left me. Man, I'm blessed.

M

But you still fully expected to be sent away to prison for decades, probably the rest of your life.

RLD

Yeah, 30 years. That DA was trying to send me up for the next 30 years. He was trying to send a message to rogue cops. I thought maybe there would be some way to work out a plea deal or whatever where they'd give me 10 years or something. But getting off scot-free? That wasn't in my mind. I never thought I would get out with no time—there's just no way I could see a way out with my crimes.

But I had favor with that judge. She was very kind to me. She had an issue with sending me away for 30 years. As she said to the DA, "He turned himself in. Y'all didn't catch him!" They were acting like they caught me. But that judge, she actually gave me the time, but then she just suspended the sentence. She satisfied the DA for protocol purposes

and gave me the 30 years, but then she said "I suspend…" I'm looking at my attorney like, what the hell is she even saying?

M

What a shock that must have been!

RLD

That was the crowning moment that let me know again that God was running the show. Here's the crazy part, though: I left in December of 1979 and came back in December of 2001—22 years almost to the day. The judge that initially sentenced me in 1979 was still on the bench in 2001. Okay, but watch this, that judge was *sick* the day that I turned myself in, and so I had to go before that new judge who was sitting in temporarily for him.

Later, after the new judge sentenced me, I had to go back to that court for a status hearing—I was already sentenced and on probation. When I went back, I went before the old judge, who was back from his illness. When the name Robert Leon Davis came up on the docket, he said—to the DA—"Is that the Robert Leon Davis from years ago that did all these crimes?" "Yeah, Judge Brown adjudicated him." He said, "What?!" The DA said, "Yeah, your honor, you were sick." And he said, "She let him GO?! Scot free?" You could see how upset he was.

Now what's the odds of me coming to his court on a day that he's sick? That's not luck. That's divine intervention. Had everything not happened exactly at the timing that it happened I would've gone before the old judge who would've given me the 30 years. If I'd have waited three days more to turn myself in—if I had pondered that or debated that moment—I wouldn't be talking to you now.

M

That's incredible.

RLD

I knew, when I had turned myself in, that a person could ask for forgiveness all you want, but you still gotta serve your time. But there are certain people that not only ask for forgiveness but they're restored. God not only forgave me, but *restored* me as well.

M

You wrote that, after being driven by fear for so long, suddenly you were "no longer scared."

RLD

I wasn't. When you're being led by something that is *true* like that, it's a different kind of boldness you've got. I remember when the judge asked me, she said, "Mr. Davis, are you guilty of this crime?" I said, "Your honor, I not only did that crime but many other crimes." I remember my lawyer was like, "Please don't, man! She doesn't need to know all that!"

But when you're really, really free, you're just done. Do what you want with this body.

M

Once you realized what was happening—that you were getting off scot-free—what were you feeling?

RLD

Aw, man. It's hard to describe. All I can tell you is that, man, I felt like a newborn baby. That was the first time that I experienced joy in my life. That was when I really understood what joy means. Joy is not laughing or just feeling happy. Joy is like: I'm just so freaking grateful.

It wasn't nothing I did. It was God's mercy.

I don't need to believe that God was merciful to me—I know it.

M

What do you say to somebody who says to you that it wasn't right that they let you off, that you shouldn't have been shown mercy?

RLD

Yeah, I got that quite a bit especially back when I did interviews and book signings. We like to see people get punished. But if we can't punish them ourselves, we like to see them punish themselves, you know what I'm saying? And so that's what I would do a lot of times in interviews and at events—I'd punish myself. I tell people exactly what I did, how stupid I was, and I tell them I don't keep the profits from this. I show them that I have contrition and that what I did is bothering me even today at 67 years old. It does bother me.

And that's what happened to me. When you're truly, truly repentant, it's not a hard thing to show. I'm grieving. I don't care who is looking at me. I put myself down. Even to this day, I tell it like it is: I was an idiot. They need to see you fall, so you fall.

M

One more question: I was thinking about the kind of kid you were—so few resources, so few good opportunities. If we believe that being shown mercy is what makes people become better, how could we be more merciful to kids that were like you?

RLD

It's hard to do. Because I think the only people who can really do it are people who've been through something. For somebody to be really truly merciful, you have to have gone through stuff. The reason I can say that is, I mean, look at all of God's powerful people—like Paul and Moses, darlings of Judaism and Christianity—none of them skipped the line. They all did stuff. You have to go through stuff first. Those guys were murderers. Just think about that.

Now you don't have to be a murderer, but something has to impact you for you to understand, now that you've crossed over to a better life, how to talk and be merciful to those you left behind. It's like me: When I see homeless people now, I have a different take on them than normal people. It's totally different. I go out of my way to interact with them and help them. Once you've gone through it, you understand things differently.

M

Once you've experienced mercy yourself, you have a larger capacity to extend it.

RLD

Exactly. I do think that a normal person can be merciful, because God puts that in some people. But the ones who are most prone to be merciful are the ones who have been through stuff. God always takes the base things in life—the things everybody casts aside—to manifest his power.

That's why I try to help younger people. At my age, I'm not going to be here forever. I'm trying to get somewhere. I don't care if I be the janitor in heaven, I'm just trying to get in the door.

TESTIMONY

By Joshua Mackin

A Song of Ascents

1.

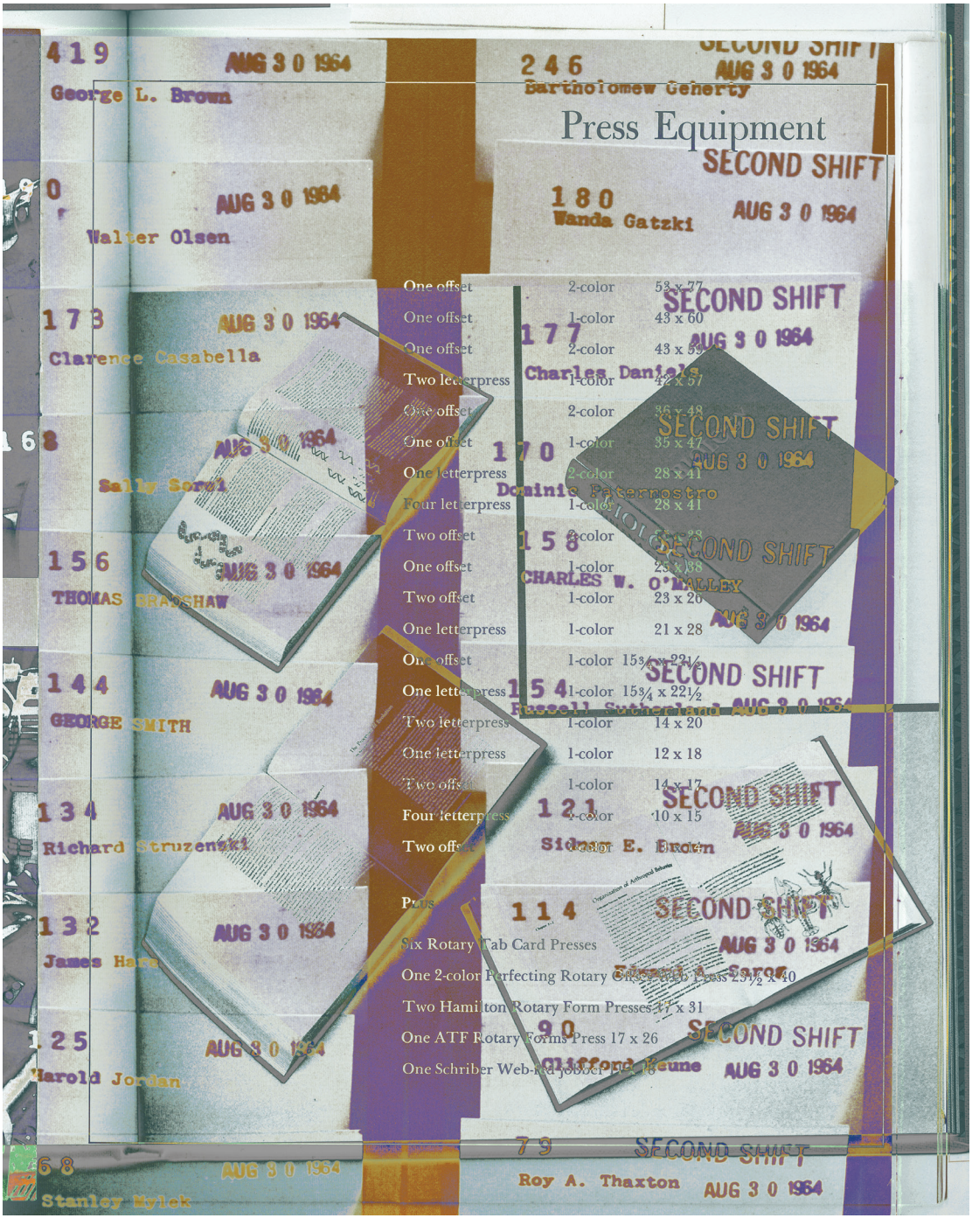
Life has its seasons. At thirty-seven years old, I'm in what you might call my "American capitalist" phase. I live in New Jersey but work for a large media company in New York, a second act career after nearly ten years as a teacher. Every day, I go down into the termite tunnels of the PATH train and chug under the Hudson alongside other long-sufferers of the commuter class. We're a democratic bunch: bankers, software engineers, bricklayers. The whole mixed bag. Our democracy isn't vocal or obvious. What unites us is the long-suffering, pretty much. Train delays. Track work. We jostle one another, mostly don't talk, avoid eye contact.

At 33rd, we are disgorged and carom up to the street. I like to walk west along 34th, where the sidewalks are wider. Some days there are protestors or doomsayers proclaiming various horrible endings, religious, political, climatic. One gentleman in particular has a penchant for oversized signage, held aloft. He parts the crowds under the shadow of a search term. *Buy crypto. Google it.*

Further west I arrive at a glass tower. This one still has the whiff of an architectural rendering. A large mall occupies its base. I take two escalators and walk past stores like Louis Vuitton, Rolex, and Genesis—the latter being a South Korean luxury car maker, with whole-ass cars on the second floor. I scan my badge at the corporate lobby entrance and am whisked up by elevator for a series of meetings, emails, and pitch decks—a mélange of what is considered, institutionally speaking, "creative" work. From my desk I look down on a massive 150-foot tall sculpture called the *Vessel*, comprising 154 intricately interconnected flights of stairs. You used to be able to climb each flight to the top. But the *Vessel* is empty now, barred and guarded. It was closed soon after opening because too many people were committing suicide by leaping off it.

After work, after the mirror-image commute home, my daughters, five and three, greet me at the door of our third-floor prewar walkup. Dinner is usually ready, or almost ready, when I arrive. My wife cooks most days. Maybe it's a retrograde way to divide the labors of parenthood, but it works for us. After dinner, we all play videogames or stuffed animals together, then start on the blessed path to sleep. There's a Jenga tower quality to this part of the day, a feeling, hard to shake, that the mishandling of even one brick—teeth brushing, potty, PJs, story books—could lead to the destruction of the whole enterprise. But we get there in the end, singing hymns in the dark until the girls are asleep.

At which point my wife and I have two hours, tops, before we collapse into bed. The



James Welling, *Notation2_11H*, 2015-16.
Dye Sublimation Print, 20 x 16 in.

act of reading, once a great shared joy, seems closed to us now. We nod off after only a few pages, disappointed in the weakness of our flesh. An episode or two of a good show is some substitutive consolation. But the greater consolation is oblivion: the dreamless, selfless sleep known by parents of young children everywhere. These days, this oblivion takes me almost every night without fail—until, still exhausted, the giggles of two little girls wake me, the clock reads 5:30am, and I come back to the world to do it all over again.

Months, years of this with minor variations.

2.

How does this sketch of my life strike you?

Does it seem glum? Privileged? Self-aggrandizing? Self-pitying? Dull?

For me, lately, I am struck by the fact that its fundamental contours are indistinguishable from those of my grandfather's, who took the Long Island Rail Road every day into Manhattan after the war to his office at the Bell telephone company. He lived under the same dictates. Make money. Provide for your family. Climb the ladder. Seen from that angle, I'm only a latecomer in a long, long line, taking my place in the melancholic, rat-race story shared by millions across the generations, and which, despite many recent innovations, has not disappeared yet. As a quintessential diagnosis of the American condition, "lives of quiet desperation" has been a hot-take since Walden Pond, 1854, after all.

Or maybe that has it backwards. Maybe there's something enlivening or even admirable about this story, of which I am a small paragraph or mere sentence. It's the human epic we are all invited to take part in: the vitalizing struggle to make something of one's self, to make a better life. Consider it an outworking of "the universal eligibility to be noble" voiced by Augie Marsh, that prototypical American, a subspecies of our great collective vocation to keep things going onward and upward in perpetuity.

Or maybe this is all too overheated for your tastes. Maybe you're like me, who, years ago, when I saw a performance artist dressed like an Orthodox Jew diving into an inflatable kiddie pool and screaming, "I'm falling into shit!" over and over in various registers of distress, thought *yes*.

Maybe that's it. Life as a series of descents into shit. Train bullshit. Work bullshit. Money bullshit. Kid bullshit. The same bullshit everybody has to navigate, and then you die. Which, while bleak, at least has some humor, albeit of the gallows pole, about it.

And yet.

3.

I am grateful for my life. I can't escape the feeling.

Which is kind of a marvel to me, because there was a good stretch back there, say from thirteen to seventeen, when I thought about killing myself more or less constantly. It was a painful time. I had moved from the Philippines, where I was born, to a small town in Pennsylvania, where I most definitely did not want to be. It was hard for all the reasons you can imagine it being hard. And it was also perfectly mundane. The bottom line was I had the unshakeable feeling I would never be happy again.

I would've been a wrist-cutter, which makes me cringe now. At the time, there was some-

thing poignant about the thought of wearing all that blood down my arms. The blood held a straightforward metaphoric power. Its visibility drew me: a physical manifestation of the anguish I felt, of inside pain turned outside. You'd think that logic would've led me to something less drastic, like simply cutting myself. But I'd never heard of that then, and so never considered it.

What I had heard of was suicide. Around that time a friend of a friend hung himself in the mild Pennsylvania woods behind his house. Afterward my friend, the one left behind, told me he spent an evening looking at the rifle in his room, and imagining firing it into his mouth. We became a depressed little pair. We kept each other circling the suicide drain, arms linked, dragging ourselves down. Each of us disappointing the other with how little we had to give, how needy we were. I was a bad friend to him. Too wrapped up in my own circumstantial sadness. But in the end neither of us ended up killing ourselves, so maybe that strange embrace counted for something.

There were other compounding factors. It was the early, wild days of the internet, and the horrors of the world could intrude easily at any moment. Horrible images of gore on otherwise innocuous message boards would load line by line then suddenly all at once. Tiny, grainy videos of beheadings were intentionally misnamed and swapped on Napster. Low-res digital ephemera was everywhere, of people dying, of human suffering, of cruelty to animals. In today's internet, these are still just a click away, and there was a sense then, just as there is now, that you could run across them in the normal course of business, like being mugged on the way to the corner store. And I had a hunger to see these things, feeling as if the secret shape of the world was contained therein. They were evidence. They corresponded with my own sense of the way things were.

Because I had my own memories, too, which dogged me: of the street kids my age, dirtied and in rags, who were constant companions in Manila, where I grew up, their upturned hands at the car windows, outside the storefronts, down the block, and whose situation seemed nonsensical and unjust; of the toddler I saw once, a baby, really, on a garbage heap, something the color of pea-soup oozing from his anus, crying and crying and no one coming to comfort him; of the story my mother told me about a friend of the family, whose father was a human rights lawyer in the Marcos era, and who was chopped up for his noble pains and put into a bag for his daughter, our friend, to discover. And so on. This was what was more true to life, I felt, not the perfectly lovely suburban home I'd moved to in perfectly lovely small-town Pennsylvania.

By some transmogrification, then, I came to associate suicide with a repudiation of human suffering writ large. I had a sneaking suspicion we should admire them—those few who, in my telling of it, at least, could never get accustomed to these things, who found that the only decent thing to do in the face of the overwhelming pain of the world was to turn away, permanently. It was easy for this to slip into disdain for myself and for the rest of the, er, living. Because one way or another we went on—a fact that condemned us.

Anyway, you get the idea. Whether or not all this was justified, whether or not at twelve or thirteen or sixteen I had any right to feel this way, or knew anything at all about the way of the world, the wound of it felt real enough to me. And I can't help but have compassion on that self-involved boy, who spent so many nights looking up

at the spackled ceiling above his bed in silent pain and thinking too much about turning his back on it, who felt that the only tenable solution to the human situation was an immediate exit through the house of death.

Looking back, I wonder how close I was to actually going through with it. Not close, I think. The ideation was strong, and I spent a lot of time looking into that void, and thinking about what it would mean. But life, blessedly, rolls on. Things happen. I am swept on by circumstance. I have college to attend, girls to meet, books to read, new music, new movies to bowl me over, new friends. And in snatches at first, and then for longer periods, and then as a more or less stable baseline, I find myself enjoying some measure of happiness.

Even so, suicide is a kind of shadow. It is a challenge, repudiation, temptation, and puzzle all in one. In the years since, the shadow has receded. But I've remained attuned to it, and though suicide has stayed more or less at arm's length in the intervening years, arriving via the generally remote forms of celebrity news, literature, memories, occasional periods of depression, or very distant relatives, it still never fails to get my spectral antennae twitching.

4.

Then she took her life during COVID. And all these things come rushing back.

Her name was Ashley. We'd both moved to New York around the same time. We were both around the same age. We both had two kids. And if we weren't fast friends, we were certainly friendly, and we worshiped together at the same small scrappy church in the West Village and saw each other at the same parties and loved many of the same things.

And now she is gone, and it really hurts.

5.

At church this past Advent we prayed the bidding prayer, which includes this passage:

> Lastly, let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore, and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom in the Lord Jesus we are one for evermore.

After the service a friend told me she'd been thinking of Ashley during that prayer, and something broke in both of us at the same time as she said it, and we were crying together, hard ugly crying, in the cold stairwell outside the women's bathroom.

And I have cried most Sundays since, thinking about Ashley. Nothing that dramatic. Just a few silent tears in my pew. It's a new thing. Even in those depressed adolescent days I wasn't much of a crier. But I've cried more in the last six months than I have in a long time. It's strange.

I cry at the children gathered at the front of the church, arrayed for prayer before they head down to Sunday school, and at the few faithful congregants who outstretch their hands toward them, praying with their eyes closed, praying earnestly for these our little ones. And I hope to God the impossible thing, that the shadow of death would never fall across them. And I think of Ashley's two sweet boys.

I cry thinking of all this small congregation has endured: suicides, stillborns, cancers, job loss, manic episodes, heartbreak, depression, death. It's not the fact of this suffering that makes me cry so much as it is those who've survived it, who are still here, and who suffer, sometimes without apparent reason, sometimes without explanation, but more often than not on purpose for the ones they love.

At the final hymn, I cry at the sweeping sound of the choir during the descant, bursting to life behind us from the upper balcony, when suddenly this congregation's plodding voice is taken up and sent sailing into the stratosphere, and my poor voice, too, is welcome, and gathered with the others to be part of something so beautiful.

And I cry at certain lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins, which had gone dry for me for years, but which I return to now like a deer at a salt lick:

> Give beauty back, beauty, beauty,
> beauty, back to God, beauty's
> self and beauty's giver.
> See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not
> the least lash lost; every hair
> Is, hair of the head, numbered.

And:

> …the thing we freely forfeit is kept
> with fonder a care,
> Fonder a care kept than we could have
> kept it, kept
> Far with fonder a care (and we, we
> should have lost it) finer, fonder
> A care kept.

I collect these things that make me cry, and carry them with me against everything contrary. I receive the tears they give as mercies, parched as I am. And looking around the sanctuary, the office, the PATH train, the living room, it is a grace to know I'm not the only one.

6.

So I am returned to my life. Picture us there at the dinner table. It's only a few days ago. My youngest daughter is refusing, again, to eat anything we put before her. She climbs up and down out of her high chair, whines, is unpleasant and rude. My wife and I have our hands full. We can barely talk, we can barely eat trying to deal with her. Meanwhile my other daughter has somehow magicked the cinnamon shaker to the table. She pats a huge cloud onto her plate, and is suddenly squealing. She's gotten some in her eye and it burns.

"It's always something," my wife says, beyond exasperated now, sweeping her up to wash out her eyes in the sink.

It's always something. But it's better than nothing. My God, it's so much better than nothing.

By Mischa Willett

Mercy Is for the Weak

Mr. Miyagi and *The Merchant of Venice*

Mr. Miyagi has played it so cool the whole movie long that when we finally see him respond, after the All-Valley Karate Tournament, after Sensei Kreese from the rival Cobra Kai dojo breaks Johnny Lawrence's trophy and strikes his own students, there's a feeling the audience has—one that we're supposed to have—that goes something like *ohhh, he's going to get it now!* We're about to see justice enacted, wrongs set right. It tingles in the belly, the anticipation. As viewers of the film *The Karate Kid* (1984) will remember, what we actually see is Kreese attack Miyagi, who, just in time, steps smoothly aside causing the Sensei to miss, punching out the windows of a nearby car and rendering the weapons of his hands useless. Finally, we think, oh let justice roll down like a mighty torrent! Like a great rushing of waters! Miyagi raises his hand for a classic karate chop, growling from his *dan tien* to summon the power that we know can break clean through sheets of solid ice—what might that hand do to a man's face?—only to stop the flood at the last moment, like some angel disarming a would-be sacrificer on the mountain. Instead of Miyagi annihilating this opponent, he deals out a playful honk of the nose, in a gesture a bit like the Native American practice of counting coup: a nick that says "I could have taken you out and didn't."

I'm thinking about *The Karate Kid* first because I grew up in the 80s, so I'm sort of always thinking about *The Karate Kid*. Yesterday as I wrote this, my son Sebastian wanted to play wrestling, so I taught him the crane kick. As the saying should probably go, "You can take the kid out of the 80s, but you can't take the 80s out of the kid." But more than that, I'm thinking about this scene because I've just finished teaching a college course on Shakespeare.

I probably shouldn't have assigned it. I've taught it before and it always goes the same way. But there is so much good in it, so much that's worth getting and so many conversations worth having, that the *Merchant of Venice* wandered onto our syllabus again this year, though cautiously. At first, the play goes pretty well; as Shakespeare texts go, it's one of the easier ones for stu-

Daniel (Ralph Macchio) and Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita)
in *The Karate Kid*, dir. John G. Avildsen, 1984.

dents to understand. They like imagining *quattrocento* Venice. They like the fairytale subplot about Portia, whose husband will be chosen via a kind of shell game, and who delivers the lovely "quality of mercy is not strained" speech. They understand Antonio, the merchant who needs to borrow money to achieve his grand dreams and who opens the play with a relatable bit of melancholia:

> I know not why I am so sad
> It wearies me, you say it wearies you,
> But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
> What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born
> [I know not]

And they're stirred by Shylock, the Jewish banker, who argues for the universal brotherhood of all people, a plea for sympathy across religious and racial lines that still shocks in its candor.

> Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?

But then we get to the trial scene, with its dramatic reversal, and they're shocked beyond resuscitation. It's over. No way this is allowable.

What happens is this: Shylock has had it in for a rival businessman to whom he's lent money the whole play long, and when the latter defaults on the debt, Shylock is legally entitled, to collect "a pound of flesh"

from him as payment. It's a crazy deal, but one Antonio signed with all due gravity and presence of mind. Like many of us I suppose, he never thought he'd really have to pay it. Anyway, his own Judgment Day comes and Shylock comes at him like an avenging angel with a knife—will he collect the pound of flesh from his face? From his genitals? From his heart? His worst enemy is entirely at his mercy. Antonio can't even cry for help because police or community interference at this point would be illegal, and Venice is a city built on (water, and) legal contracts.

But then, the fine print. Through clever legal exegesis, the knife is knocked from the hand—Shylock can have his flesh but not his blood. Since he can't very well manage that, the original legal judgement is moot. Defeated, Shylock is about to sulk off, when someone points out that the whole court has just watched him try to kill a fellow citizen. He was really going to shed blood right there in front of everyone. Shouldn't he be tried for attempted murder? Yes, his life is now forfeit to Antonio; the strong are

weak and the weak the strong! The whole kingdom is upside down! Antonio, perhaps tired of this legal circus and knowing just what it's like to be afraid, asks no legal recourse apart from Shylock's conversion: "that he become a Christian."

For my students, this is the cruelest cut. Indeed, for most modern readers, it is a forced conversion, inauthentic on Shylock's part and an evil imposition on the part of the court. And if it were that, I would agree, but Shakespeareans have been split on this matter more or less since the play debuted and I count myself among those who take Shylock's conversion as spontaneous and real. This is tricky to talk about in the shadow of anti-Semitism, especially in Europe, and especially in the recent century, but I think it's worth talking about still. First, because this play and this character have done such a great deal to argue for the dignity of the Jewish people and for oppressed people generally, and second, because the scene we're discussing can be read as mercy itself enacted. But it happens quietly, as most such things do.

Maybe let's think of it this way: what Shylock loses—and voluntarily as we will see—is not his cultural identity, but his captivity to the Law. To "become a Christian" in this case is not to leave behind his people, his heritage, or his religious practices so much as it is to accept that the universe runs on Grace. The play is not meant to depict Christianity as better than Judaism, but to depict how *one man* came to see how blind he'd been, even though he "had eyes." In order to see that, he needs to be stripped of all the illusions of safety and self-sufficiency that being rich had afforded him.

The difficulty with reading this conversion is that it's invisible, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. Hearing the request at trial's end, Shylock simply says, "I am content." But in the space between the initial charge and that statement, three things have taken place. First, Antonio finally has Shylock exactly where he has himself been many times: in his debt. But rather than lord it over him, he shows mercy. At first this doesn't make sense to Shylock, still seething in his rage at having been cheated of what is his by rights. As Sensei Kreese tells his students, "We do not train to be merciful here."

Second, Antonio is now pretty wealthy, having just won the trial, and he immediately asks that the money be used to provide for Shylock's daughter, who has just been disowned, thereby demonstrating radical charity. What kind of person is this? Shylock knows how hard up for money Antonio is because he's been his creditor. And now that Antonio is rich he just gives it away? And not to help his own people, but to help the family of his attacker? What kind of freedom makes such a gesture possible? As Shylock processes these wonders, we should be seeing the chains fall off.

Thirdly, Shylock has just committed attempted murder, and has forfeited his own life thereby. He's guilty, and, knowing a thing or two about the law, he knows he's guilty. The trial judge suggests an immediate hanging but defers to Antonio, who could now plunge the knife into him right there in the courtroom with complete immunity. It's what Shylock would have done; it's what he tried to do just moments ago. But no. Another power is at work. There is a deeper magic than the Venetian legal code, deeper than our eye-for-an-eye instinct. Without a thought, his life is gifted back to him. The old Shylock was all but dead in his transgressions, completely

powerless to save himself. When he realizes this, when he accepts it, as if out-of-nowhere: second life. Finally, so far have his sins been driven away, that he is not asked to answer for his crimes at all: he's given no prison sentence, no banishment. Instead, he is welcomed into fellowship, to baptism. When the judge queries, "What mercy can you render him?" Antonio suggests he make an outward sign of the invisible grace he's just experienced.

Walking back to the truck after the tournament, Daniel asks, "You could have killed him back there, couldn't you?"

"Aye."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"Because, Daniel-san, a person with no forgiveness in heart lives in even worse punishment than death."

In the play, Shylock is not forced to do anything; he's freed. He's just watched the old system crumble before the eyes that we know from the speech he has, and has seen the mercy that makes Christianity compelling. In short, when he says, "I am content," we should believe him. And we should note too that his next comment—Shylock's last in the play—begins with "I pray," and goes on to describe how he isn't feeling well. Even if he is only doing a typical bit of Shakespearean beseeching here, that's still something. *He's needing.* And it's easy to read this particular prayer as defeatist, but it's just as possible to read it as humanizing. The tireless persecutor is tired, the symbol of insatiability is now a mortal man, feeling things.

One more point that's worth considering. The "hath not a Jew eyes?" monologue is rightly read as a plea for empathy, for understanding, for humanizing the other. But that's only half of it. We're not only supposed to see some of "them" as one of "us," but to see ourselves in them. We're not that different. When we read the play then, we're not supposed to think of Shylock as some villain who gets his comeuppance, bloody fists waving around helplessly in the parking lot. Rather, we're supposed to see that we're him, too. We're the ones who expect the law will save us. We're the ones expecting our enemies to get what's coming. We're the ones who demand rewards for having kept the rules. And we're the ones who need to lose all of those expectations, all our security, everything that we think makes us *us* if we're going to find, well, what?

"Contentment" is a funny word. Technically, it means "to be satisfied with what one has," but what Shylock has here in the end is nothing. Finally, he's stripped of the wealth he'd been choking on (and that he'd choked others with); mercifully, he's lost the social prestige attendant on a man with heirs and position; blessedly, he's given up even the rage, the bitterness that had fueled both his business transactions and his relationships so far. He's empty for the first time and content, one suspects, for the first time too. He loses the whole world, we might say. Helpless as a child, he's finally in a position to receive something, which is everything.

When Mercy Seasons Justice

Expressions of Mercy in the Plays of William Shakespeare

By **Benjamin Self**

Portia's famous speech to Shylock in Act IV of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is undoubtedly one of the most sublime passages on "the quality of mercy" in all of literature. Yet it goes without saying that many of Shakespeare's greatest plays, from *Hamlet* to *Macbeth* to *King Lear*, are chock-full of the opposite of mercy—cruelty, ruthlessness, vengeance. You could say that the bulk of his tragedies and histories are primarily about *mercilessness*; about what happens when we abandon mercy in our quest for power, revenge, or control; about our unwillingness or inability to treat others as flawed children of God who need love and patience as much as we do.

Nevertheless, the 37 (or so) plays that Shakespeare penned with goose feather quill between 1590 and 1613 still offer plenty of stirring examples of mercy, and not just among the comedies. After more than 400 years, his oeuvre remains an almost inexhaustible well of inspiration, and many of my own favorite Shakespearean scenes—the ones my moral imagination keeps coming back to—are those of the greatest displays of mercy. Here are examples from nine of his plays.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595–6)

You might not expect this beloved romantic comedy, the most often performed of all of Shakespeare's plays, to have much substance to show us about mercy, but if mercy is simply "compassion or forgiveness shown to someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm" (Merriam-Webster), then it does indeed abound. Like so many Shakespearean comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends not only with a slew of weddings but with a kind of universal large-heartedness, in which all wrongs are forgiven and everything seems to work out well for just about everyone. But it takes a while to get there.

At the outset, no one is being terribly merciful. Yet after many twists and turns, Oberon, king of fairies, finally takes pity on the cast of delirious humans and enlists the fairy Puck to set right the whole mess (which they helped create), clearing the way for a joyous triple marriage. But there's a broader lesson here as well: that love itself is a kind of mercy. As this play makes clear, to love another is to have compassion on a flawed and often pathetic person. In fact, love transfigures the beloved. As Helena says early on, "Things base and vile, holding no quantity [a.k.a. value] / Love can transpose to form and dignity." And that's what happens in this play: these silly, overdramatic, sexually charged teenagers all end up hopelessly bonded together in love, and not because any of them are *worthy* of such devotion, but because the fairies (gods?), in their mercy, finally sprinkled "love-juice" in the eyes of the right characters at the right time.

As You Like It (1599–1600)

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* is a whimsical forest-centered comedy that begins with numerous interlocking conflicts—in this case romantic, familial, and political—and concludes with a dizzying array of reconciliations and marriages. By play's end, it seems like just about everyone here is eager to join the "country copulatives." This time, a whopping four couples are married

("Cupid have mercy!"), even prompting an appearance from Hymen, the god of marriage, who proclaims to all that there is great "mirth in heaven / When earthly things, made even, / Atone together."

But perhaps the play's most memorable act of mercy transpires between Orlando and his older brother Oliver. As the oldest, Oliver inherited his family's wealth and property from their late parents and was tasked with caring for his younger brother. Inexplicably, however, Oliver "hates nothing more" than his indigent younger brother and seeks every means to bring about Orlando's downfall—attempting to injure him, to burn down his lodgings with him inside, and eventually to murder him outright.

One day, while pursuing Orlando in the forest of Arden, Oliver stops

for a nap. By chance, Orlando happens upon his sleeping brother, and first scares away a deadly snake he sees "wreathed" around Oliver's neck. Then, bizarrely, a lioness appears, intent on attacking the still sleeping Oliver. Though inclined to flee, Orlando's "kindness, nobler ever than revenge" compels him to stay and sacrifice his own body to fight off the lion, again saving his villainous brother. At last, the two brothers reconcile through this show of grace, which also has the effect of inducing a miraculous conversion in Oliver. "'Twas I, but 'tis not I," the repentant brother intones.

Henry V (1598–9)

Apart from romantic comedies, the first decade of Shakespeare's writing career was marked by an abundance of history plays, among which no comic character stands out more than that gloriously grotesque reprobate, Sir John Falstaff, who is featured in three plays—*Henry IV, Part I*, *Henry IV, Part II*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—and mentioned in a fourth, *Henry V.* In the rare waking moments when Falstaff is not stone drunk in some ramshackle tavern, bellowing and chasing prostitutes, he is usually out with his risible gang of fellow low-lifes scheming some criminal plot. His only claim to fame is as the on-and-off drinking pal of the wayward Prince Hal, who is forever shirking his royal responsibilities.

Yet for all his flaws, when Falstaff's comeuppance does finally come at the close of *Henry IV, Part II*, it feels especially cruel. Prince Hal has become king, and Falstaff believes he has it made. But in the play's final scene, the new king tears him to shreds: "I know thee not, old man. / […] How ill white hairs become a fool and jester. / […] [T]he grave doth gape / For thee thrice wider than for other men." Claiming to have "turned away my former self," the king banishes Falstaff "on pain of death."

This rebuke makes for a very somber end to *Henry IV, Part II*, and if you hoped Falstaff might make a comeback in *Henry V*, you'd be disappointed. By the opening of *Henry V*, Falstaff is dead, leaving us to ask: Is there no mercy to be had for this most lovable rake? Well, in small measure, there is. In Act II, Scene III, a few of Falstaff's old cronies have gathered at his favorite tavern, the Boar's Head. Though Falstaff was surely a difficult patron, the inn-keeper Mistress Quickly describes how she cared for him as he lay dying, and pronounces a brief, touching eulogy: "Nay, sure, he's not in hell! He's in Arthur's / bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom." Presumably, she means Abraham's bosom, but we get the gist. "He / made a finer end, and went away an it had been any / christom child [i.e., like a child at baptism]," she says, even crying out to God as he breathed his last. In some small way, this feels like an act of mercy on the part of Shakespeare himself, nevertheless welcoming dear old Sir John back into the fold.

Hamlet (1600–1)

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is Shakespeare's longest and perhaps most famous play, and about as tragic as it gets. At nine deaths, it trails only *Titus Andronicus* (14), *Richard III* (11), and *King Lear* (10) for the total body count of named characters.

So where's the mercy? Well, first there's this strange *deus ex machina* experience Hamlet has with the pirates. After Hamlet secretly orchestrates the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his ship is attacked by pirates and Hamlet alone is taken captive. These improbable pirates, who Hamlet later lauds as "thieves of mercy," decide not in fact to kill him, but instead to swiftly deliver him back home to his native Denmark, supposedly in exchange for later favors from the prince. This bizarre and pivotal reversal, alongside Hamlet's ruminations in the graveyard, seem to spark a softening in his heart and outlook that continues until his eventual demise.

Of course, the play still ends in a bloodbath, but it is one tinged more with regret and forgiveness than vengeance. Perhaps most notably, after Hamlet and Laertes have both mortally wounded one another, the two seek to make amends. With his dying breath, Laertes, who had blamed Hamlet for the deaths of his father and sister, instead releases him: "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me." And Hamlet returns this gesture, saying, "Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee."

King Lear (1605–6)

Though as bitter and brutal as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* likewise contains pivotal acts of mercy—like scant pearls within its dark shell—that make possible the belated reconciliations that occur at the play's end. The narrative revolves primarily around two mirroring family dramas, that of King Lear and his three daughters, and that of the nobleman Gloucester and his two sons.

Ultimately, it is only as men robbed of their wealth and senses, and banished to the wilds, that these two tragic fathers both find the aid of Good Samaritans. Lear, for his part, is trailed onto the heath by his faithful Fool, soon joined by Kent, Gloucester, and Edgar—the latter disguised as a homeless lunatic. Together, the four help guide and care for Lear through his stormy descent into madness. Similarly, when Gloucester himself is cast out sightless to stumble towards Dover, it is his loyal son Edgar, still disguised, who touchingly guides and consoles him. Most memorably, when Gloucester reaches the very depths of despair and begs Edgar to help him commit suicide, Edgar plays along but tricks Gloucester into surviving the attempt and regaining his will to live—trifling, he says, "with

his despair / […] [in order] to cure it." He convinces Gloucester that he jumped off a cliff the length of "ten [ship] masts" but was saved by a miracle of the gods.

In both cases, these kindnesses help the fathers survive long enough to be reconciled each to their lone remaining loyal child—who, in Lear's case, is nevertheless executed at the hands of the French. Notably, this ending was so tragic that for over a century, *King Lear* was most often performed according to a 1681 adaptation in which the loyal Cordelia lives. If only!

Coriolanus (1607–8)

Caius Marcius Coriolanus was a legendary Roman general of the 5th century BC, the early days of the Roman Republic. Inspired by this legend, as one source describes it, *Coriolanus* is "a full-throttle war play that revels in the sweat of the battlefield."

A fantastically successful general, Coriolanus gains great acclaim and is given his surname for his singular heroism in the battle for Corioles. Yet as a man, he is ruthless, proud, inflexible, irascible, and full of contempt for the common people. When the patricians convince Coriolanus to pursue a political career and seek the consulship, Rome's highest elected office, these flaws come to haunt him. The crowds turn on him, and Coriolanus is banished from Rome. Cast out, disillusioned, and filled with hate, he joins his former enemies the Volscians, and makes plans to enact his revenge. Before long, he and the Volscian army are marching towards Rome, burning everything in their path. "We are all undone," laments Menenius. "[T]here is no more mercy / In him than there is milk in a male tiger."

But at the last moment, something astonishing happens. The immovable man is moved to mercy by the intervention of his mother. Hearing her desperate pleas, Coriolanus breaks down in tears, crying: "[M]other, mother! / What have you done? Behold, the heavens do open, / The gods look down, and this unnatural scene / They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O! / You have won a happy victory to Rome." Thus Coriolanus relents, and Rome is spared. But he does so knowing it may cost him his life, and indeed, returning among the Volscians, he is soon torn to pieces.

Measure for Measure (1604–5)

In the early 1600s, Shakespeare began to write more plays that were not simply comedies or tragedies, but some tonally complex mixture of the two. These plays have been grouped together by scholars in various ways under various headings, including as "tragicomedies," "comedies of forgiveness," "problem plays," and "post-tragic plays." *Measure for Measure* is often included in these categories, and is a fascinating, if challenging tale for the issues it raises at the interplay of law and grace.

The story takes place in Vienna, where the strict, self-righteous Lord

Angelo sets about trying to address the city's moral licentiousness. First, Angelo arrests the young gentleman Claudio, whose fiancé Juliet is pregnant, sentencing him to death for sex out of wedlock. Then he issues a proclamation shutting down the city's brothels. Isabella, soon-to-be-nun and sister to Claudio, gets word of her brother's impending execution and rushes to the city to meet with Angelo and beg for mercy. All her entreaties fall on deaf ears until Angelo finds himself strangely attracted to her. At their next meeting, he offers her a deal: "You must lay down the treasures of your body" in exchange for your brother's life. Appalled, she refuses in despair. In the final act, with everyone believing Claudio to be dead, Angelo's misdeeds are exposed, and the Duke calls for Angelo's execution. "[T]he law cries out / […] 'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!'"

Yet, here we see the play's most extraordinary act of mercy. First, Angelo's formerly jilted lover Mariana pleads that Angelo's life be spared. The Duke rejects these entreaties, until *Isabella*—who still believes her brother is dead—intervenes. "Most bounteous sir," she says, "Look, if it please you, on this man condemn'd, / As if my brother lived." At last, Angelo is freed, Claudio reappears, and a parade of weddings can now take place.

The Tempest (1611–2)

The mercy that we see on display in *The Tempest*, one of Shakespeare's last plays, is a strange and uncomfortable sort, for it is both highly self-serving—bestowed as part of a larger scheme involving all manner of magic and manipulation—but also moving and by no means inevitable. Prospero, the protagonist and former Duke of Milan, lives on a deserted Mediterranean island. Like his enslaved sprite Ariel, he also possesses magical powers that allow him to exert control over other characters.

In the first scene, Prospero orchestrates a shipwreck that leaves the survivors—Prospero's old enemies—scattered around the island. We soon learn that the crash is part of Prospero's cunning plan of revenge. By the end of Act IV, after toying with his guests like puppets, Prospero muses, with self-congratulation, that "At this hour / Lie at my mercy all mine enemies." But

does he thus proceed to enact his just revenge? Not really. Instead, Prospero reveals himself in the final act with mercy and conciliation: "I do forgive / Thy rankest fault; all of them."

Of course, Prospero's mercy isn't all-encompassing or unqualified: He deals mercifully with one slave but not the other, and there is no question that his own fortunes will be restored at his brother's expense. Yet, when he could have done anything to his duplicitous rivals, he nevertheless chose to forgive them. In his final soliloquy, seeming to recognize his own need, he even asks mercy of the audience: "[M]y ending is despair, / Unless I be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself and frees all faults. / As you from crimes would pardon'd be, / Let your indulgence set me free."

The Winter's Tale (1610–1)

While the first half of *The Winter's Tale* takes the tone of a grim tragedy eerily reminiscent of *Othello*, this late comedy's final unexpected twist—one of Shakespeare's great "recognition scenes"—ultimately saves us from a redux of *Othello's* despair. The play centers around King Leontes of Sicilia, whose murderous jealousy turns him against his wife Hermione and their two children. Only when his family is presumed dead does Leontes at last realize the error of his ways. At the end of Act III, he breaks down in grief and promises to spend the rest of his days in penitent mourning.

Mercifully, the play doesn't end there. Sixteen years pass. The audience learns that Leontes' daughter Perdita did not in fact die, but was raised by a lowly shepherd family in Bohemia. Leontes has remained as penitent as ever, unable to "[d]o as the heavens have done, forget [his] evil." Yet, when he reunites with his lost daughter Perdita, the gloomy mood suddenly shifts. As onlookers describe it: "[T]hey looked as they had heard of a world ransomed […] such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it!" It's a beautiful reversal.

But the play still holds one more miracle. In the final scene, through a long trick arranged by Hermione's friend Paulina, Hermione reappears in the flesh, throwing her arms around her husband in an act of joyous forgiveness. Despite—or perhaps because of—all that has been lost between them, it's a wondrous and satisfying reunion. And yet, it's clear that this act of public restoration was only possible through the return of Perdita, which enabled Hermione to forgive Leontes. In truth, the reunion feels more mystical than human in its origins, a gift from the gods. It's a moment that thus evokes Tolkien's gospel-infused concept of the eucatastrophe—"the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'," which "does not deny the existence of […] sorrow and failure [but] denies universal final defeat […] giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." And that, somehow, feels like the greatest mercy of all.

Finding Beauty in the Struggle

Interview

WITH

Esau McCaulley

There are few writers today who as insightfully comment upon so wide an array of theological and social issues as Esau McCaulley. Whether it be his regular editorial in the *New York Times*, or articles in the *Atlantic* and *Christianity Today*, McCaulley has the audacity to talk about God amid debates about poverty, racism, family, and identity. His is a public witness to faith and its significance for everyday life, both personally and corporately, testifying to a faith that stands firmly in the public square without devolving into partisan rancor.

With everything he writes, McCaulley resists being boxed in by ideological divisions or the usual terms of the debate, always striving for a synthetic viewpoint that holds together what others rend asunder. In his award-winning book, *Reading While Black*, McCaulley pairs his training as a biblical scholar with the issues and concerns of the Black church in which he was raised, finding in scripture a message of liberation and hope, radically counter-cultural and theologically orthodox. The God who saves is the same God who seeks justice for all people. In addition to *Reading While Black,* McCaulley has published a devotional book on the season of Lent, and the children's book, *Josey Johnson's Hair and the Holy Spirit*.

In his most recent book, *How Far to the Promised Land*, McCaulley tells the story of his family's struggles with racism and poverty in the Deep South. It is a moving account of absentee fathers, faithful mothers, and their struggle to survive. But more than that, it is a testimony to human frailty, injustice, sin, compassion, undeserved grace, and the God whose mercy triumphs over evil. I was so grateful for the chance to talk with Esau about his book and its profound themes.

— Todd Brewer, interviewer

D'Angelo Lovell Williams, *Take My Hand*, 2018. Inkjet print, 51 3/4 x 35 1/4 in.

Mockingbird

One aim of *How Far to the Promised Land* is to inform the reader's understanding of racism beyond isolated events of discrimination. In other words, you are expressing that through both personal experiences and generational wrongs, the experience of being Black is more than being mistreated this one time. It's a cumulative weight placed upon Black people.

Esau McCaulley

Reader reception is an interesting thing; writers talk about how, once you write a book, it leaves your hand and you no longer have control over it. That is part of the book—part of the Black experience. I do try to show that the things that happened to me as an 18- or 16-year-old boy running around in Huntsville, AL, happened to those before me as well, going back three or four generations. I try to draw a direct line from things that happened to my great grandparents all the way to how these things informed how I was educated, and to put my experience within the course of a family saga.

But one of the other things I try to get at is the way of talking about the Black struggle that removes agency, such that we become caricatures—only victims of generational trauma that was inflicted upon us from the outside. That's not the whole story. I'm trying to say that we are not just wounded people; we also wound others, right? And so we struggle to get to the Promised Land, in part because of things that are done to us, but also in part because of the things we do to ourselves.

There's one segment of society that makes everything about personal responsibility—there are no societal influences and we can just grit our teeth and get through it. That's too simplistic. But there is another segment of people who believe that we're only a product of our past and the things that were inflicted upon us. And that's also too simplistic. What I wanted to do was to put both of those things to the reader to say, here are places where I or other people have agency to make decisions that have real negative impact on other people. And here is the way in which society does that. Discerning the percentage of blame is maybe beyond my confidence, but I know that what plagues us is not found through a reductionistic equation.

M

You're reflecting a nuanced and complex view of anthropology. We are not simply our decisions, but our decisions matter, right? And we're not simply our context, but our context matters—for good and for ill.

EM

Yes. And a doctrine of grace means that no matter how much someone wounded us, we can, through the power of God, look back at their life with a sense of regret. Not simply for the things they did to us, but for what their life was.

One other totally different way of reading the book (which maybe nobody but me

will ever do) is to read it as a long meditation on forgiveness and its meaning. How do you forgive someone who caused tons of chaos? You do it by seeing them as a person, finding their humanity. And not just their humanity, but something beautiful about their struggle.

M

At the beginning of the book, you recount a story from a speaking event where you deliberately withheld information from the moderator because, as you say, "I did not trust them to hear part of the story apart from the whole of it." So I was wondering, how would you say the whole story informs the parts, and vice versa?

EM

At that moment, she wanted me to tell this story of the worst racism I've ever experienced so that people would feel sorry for me, persuading them to somehow choose to enact some justice. But I don't know if everyone deserves access to Black pain devoid of context. What I tried to do in the book was put it into context.

Black life in America isn't just suffering. Sometimes we are required to parade our suffering just to get justice, but if we only tell the story of our suffering, it tends to reaffirm some of the worst stereotypes about Black lives. If I talk only about police violence, or only about what other people did to me, all of those things could be slotted into a simplistic narrative.

The other thing about this is, when you ask me that question, you know that I survived it, right? But what about the person who isn't here to tell that story? What about the incidences of racism that broke that person? Do they deserve a testimony? What I wanted to do in this book is not to just tell my story, but to tell the story of my family and of my community, of my church and, in some sense, of Black life in the South.

M

The story of your life is about you and your family in America, but there are two other players in the drama, one of which is racism and the other is God. God is a character who shows up punctiliously—like when you're in the neighborhood, and you're asked, "Who are you?" and you respond, "I'm a Christian."

God is behind the scenes, along the way. Can you talk about that drama?

EM

When you write a book, people ask you what the book is about. Is it about God? Is it about racism? Is it about structural racism? Is it about poverty? Our lives are not one thing, and for most of us who end up with some kind of faith as an adult, it's not like I woke up every single day asking the question about God. There were significant years of my life where I didn't think about God in a particular way at all. But then there are these moments in life when stuff that was bubbling beneath the surface kind of erupts, and then your faith becomes what it is.

In telling the story of my life, I wanted to be honest about when God played a visible role and when he didn't. Looking back, you can see all those things as providence, right? The hidden hand of God. But that's not how it feels in the day to day. Even most clergy or religious people, we're not all God all the time. We like sports, we like music, we like good food. We're just living. But then there are these moments when God feels visible.

M

You seem to go out of your way to not mention your achievements and your career. There's no mention that you did a Ph.D., for example. You say you go to Scotland.

EM

Oh, I didn't even notice that. I guess you're right.

M

Well, the story you're telling is very different from most Christian memoirs, which might say that you, by your own effort, have gotten yourself to the Promised Land. Why is this story different?

EM

I'll put it this way… I reject exceptionalism as a means of societal change, because what exceptional stories do, especially when it's a Black exceptionalism narrative, is that they take the reader on a predetermined journey. The reader simply has to root for the protagonist and be upset at the racism as it occurs, and if you've been upset at the right times and sad at the right times, there's a kind of cathartic experience when the person survives at the end. And this can create the idea that, "Oh, America puts you through it, but you can win if you just work harder." And then the point might be that we just need more exceptional Black people.

But when I got into college and beyond, it struck me how many ordinary white people were successful. They got C's and didn't take life seriously until they got to graduate school. I knew so few ordinary successful Black people. And so I'm challenging this idea that we ought to require exceptionalism from ethnic minorities.

The other reason is the definition of success that we have in America is fundamentally flawed. It's materialistic, right? We honor people who achieve the things that we say you ought to have: wealth, money, success, acclaim. And if that is true, then most of the people I knew growing up were failures—I don't see them as failures. Beyond that, their individual lives and their struggles—to survive, to thrive, to figure out what it meant to be human—had its own beauty.

I also wanted to raise the question of who's allowed to tell their story. Are the only stories that are important the ones where people achieve what we tell them to achieve? Or does my cousin, who died of AIDS at a young age—did her life mean something? I know we have the statement "Black Lives Matter" and all of that. And I agree with it obviously. But I wanted to narrate the value of the Black lives that society tosses to the side.

As I was writing this book, I was noticing that anytime a Black person gets killed, you know, by the police, or something happens to them, people always then go over the person's life and say, "Hey, he or she was arrested fifteen times." So clearly this person's life had no value. So, their death is justified. There would be an assessment of their life up to that point, and I thought that was a profoundly un-Christian way of looking at a human existence.

If you had paused my life at certain points, maybe when I'm 18 and I almost get shot, people would've assessed my life and said there was nothing there. But I think there was something there. So if something was there for me, then something was there for all of the people who were around me. Because nobody's story's over until it's over. That's the whole point of Christianity—that at any point, no matter what you've done in the past, you can begin again. I wanted to

show the beauty of human existence, even when it's hard. And that, to me, is a way of honoring my neighborhood and my church and my community as this weird, beautiful part of me. They aren't object lessons, they're persons. And by humanizing them, I'm hoping to humanize all the people who we just kind of push to the side. And if you see their story, you can ask, "How does America have to change in order for the story to stop at this point? To have kept going?" I don't challenge that story because I survived it. But I've lived to tell the tale, and it's my job to put on paper the things that other people didn't get a chance to do.

M

Tell me about the story of your name Esau and your reinterpretation of its meaning.

EM

In the Bible, Esau is the older brother of Jacob. They're twins. Esau is born first, and then Jacob. And in the Ancient Near East, the oldest brother received the inheritance. He was the head of the tribe or family. But Jacob is the one who's chosen by God. He's the one who becomes the progenitor of the nation of Israel, which is why we used to have tons of people who are named Jacob running around the world and very few Esau's. As a matter of fact, the only Esau I've ever met face-to-face is my father. It's an odd name. Why would you name your child Esau? Because in the biblical story, Esau trades his birthright for a pot of stew. I had this fear growing up that I was going to make this kind of huge mistake that was going to ruin my life.

Now, the reason I have that name, and my father has that name, is because my father's father was illiterate, but he was a deacon at his church. In the family, the legend goes that he opens the Bible and points at a word, and the word that he points to is the word Esau. But my mom, who's also the daughter of a minister, knew that Esau was a bit of a misfit in the Bible. And she gives me the middle name Daniel. So I have a double biblical name, Esau Daniel McCaulley.

And for a long time, because my father was gone from our family through most of my life, I associated both the biblical Esau and my father with failure. One thing most people don't know about me—maybe it's a secret that is out now—is that everybody in

my family calls me Daniel. Esau was this thing that I kind of pushed back against, and I'll say that the process of coming to grips with a more complicated reception of that name, and my understanding of the biblical story, is a key part of what happens in the book.

Forgive me, but I'm gonna be a little bit cagey because I've been waiting most of my life to tell that part of the story. And it was a hard-won kind of realization. I'm going to save the ending for the reader to read.

M

One of the things that shines through in the book is that, on the one hand you have prodigal fathers, and on the other hand you have saintly women.

EM

Women are the heroes—the Black women.

M

They are repeatedly. How would you describe the source of their strength?

EM

I'm going to give you the answer that they would give, and then I'm going to expand upon it. They would just tell you, "God." They would say, "Baby, ain't nothing but Jesus." And that's true. A significant part of my own spiritual development, which comes across in *Reading While Black,* is that I came to a point spiritually and intellectually where I had to decide: Do I trust my mama and my great-grandmother, or do I trust these academics—these intellectuals who've read all of these books?

There is the wisdom that my mom had, born of experience, and that my great-grandmother had, that I couldn't toss to the side. That God had made a claim upon them also made a claim upon me. But the other thing I would say is that they were strong because they had no choice. There was nobody else.

The chapter "Sophia's Choice" was initially called a "Long Line of Leavers" from the Caedmon's Call album. Remember that CD? It was initially called the "Long Line of Leavers," because my great-grandfather left his family, then my grandfather left his family, and then my father left his family. And I was the fourth generation.

But in the revisions, I said no. The center of the story is not the fact that the men left. It's that the women stayed! And it was their courage that had an effect. It was their faithfulness. They either could have abandoned their children or fought for us.

This is what happens in the Black church. Of course, there's tons of men who do great things, but a significant part of the testimony of the Black church is the strength and faith of Black women. But it's also true that all the women in the book aren't saints. They have their own struggles and issues—everybody is human. But it would be dishonest if I didn't say the faith of Black women had a strong impact on me.

M

I'd say *saintly*. How about that?

EM

That's good. And hopefully I captured it well. Hopefully other people, other African Americans who had praying grandmothers and praying mothers, will recognize in that narrative that I captured something.

M

I had a question about Sewanee.

EM

Try it. I slap Sewanee around in *Reading While Black*—and in this book.

M

Well, you express appreciation for what you learned, while at the same time recognizing that you needed "less Bertrand Russell and more Frederick Douglass."

EM

I enjoyed that sentence. That's one of the times you get to have fun. And I was thinking of who the good contrast would be. I was going through my Rolodex.

M

Bertrand Russell was a perfect choice. What was the title of his book? *Why I Am Not a Christian,* or something like that?

EM

Secular higher education shapes you in a certain way. There is kind of a role you're designed to play, to be the conscience of progressive institutions. And they taught me a kind of studied disdain for old time religion.

M

They're telling you that religion is an opiate that helped you to get to this point.

EM

"But we'll take it from here." And I said, I don't trust y'all. I don't trust you to get us to freedom.

And this is the complicated part. I didn't then go and look at limited government Republican political conservatism as the other option, right? They kind of go, "Oh, well then you just slide back and be some kind of Black political conservative." And I said, well, no. I didn't see that as intellectually compelling either.

I tried to find—and I'm still searching for—this way of being authentically Christian, authentically Black, and not reactionary. And not just taking the things that are handed to me and saying, "I must go in that way."

One of the things that was difficult to articulate is, in some writings, Black religion is kind of a nostalgia. It's kind of a flavoring in the writing that we've kind of outgrown because supposedly we know better.

M

In the same way that you love your grandmother.

EM

"Love grandma, but we ain't doing that anymore." And that is supposedly a sign of intellectual progress.

Sometimes you've got to go back to where you started. And there will be answers there that you may not have noticed in full at the time. And that departure isn't the only sign of intellectual maturity. Sometimes the departure *and the return* are signs of intellectual maturity and growth. I developed this real conviction that the God who helped my great-grandmother is real and active in my own life, and that God does not need revision to have my allegiance; that rather than I judge him, he fundamentally judges me—and through the lens of mercy and grace.

Two Poems

By Marci Rae Johnson

"FLEE AS A BIRD TO YOUR MOUNTAIN"

Psalm 11:1, Glencoe, Scotland

There is nothing to do.
Nowhere to go. Only
this stone for a seat,

my feet on a scrub
of grass and moss.

The wind still makes a sound
though there are no trees
to stir the air.

No human voice to help
or hinder just the rush

of water down the mountain
from a center patch of snow.

This silence is as ancient
as the formless earth just before
the moment when land

was divided from sea,

and the only thing I can see are these
leftover layers of mountains,

the shadows of clouds moving off
to a bright and blueing day.

WHAT NAME WILL YOU GIVE

to the desert sky?
—that particular blue that remains

at the back of my eye, long after
I've returned to this land that lacks

even one mountain to stand on.

Here there's too much water in the air
for the cloud to define its edge.

Too much gray in the blue, the melt
and smear of a storm that's trying

to tell us what we need to hear.
It might be thunder, or the roar

of the river through a rusted-out tube
—a prayer that we say in the way

our bodies move through the prairie,
green with shrub and herb, the line

of newly planted trees that dream
of forest and of glade. It might be

bending low in silence now to see
the flower whose leaves
make a cup for the rain.

By Jeremiah Webster

A Terrible Mercy Is Born

Starbuck Finds a Musket in Melville's Apocalypse

Moby Dick (1851) is the supreme fiction, Delphic oracle, and apocalyptic parable of the American Republic. It forecasts the inevitable demise of a society built on greed, ecocide, demagoguery, and fundamentalist zeal. Herman Melville, a literary stylist of remarkable genius, endows the profession of whaling with the sort of rumination the ancient Greeks reserved for the symposiums and Mount Olympus. To divine America's ultimate spiritual destiny, he casts his eye on the "lowly things of this world and the despised things" (1 Corinthians 1:28). Namely, the crew of the *Pequod*.

A central tension of the novel is whether or not these thirty men (symbolic of the Union's thirty states in 1851) can survive the leadership of Captain Ahab, a man "ready to strike the sun if it insulted me." With Miltonic flourish, Ahab recasts the harvesting of oil made of whale blubber, a literal quest for light, into a vengeful hunt. His distorted Romanticism becomes an orthodoxy of one. "May I forgive myself," he declares as lord and sovereign. Ahab perceives the transcendental within the created order, but rather than revel in it, he endeavors to subdue it. Thus he ascribes to Moby Dick, a white whale that took his leg during a previous expedition, a fearful writ, a dark gospel of volition and demonism. The whiteness of this leviathan becomes the nihilistic blank slate of Ahab's desire and madness. This makes him impervious to the "great cloud of witnesses" (both theological and nautical) who have gone before him, as well as to the insights they impart. This makes him willing to endanger the safety of his crew in service of his own vanity, renown, and magical thinking. This makes him thoroughly American.

It is Starbuck, Ahab's first mate, who apprehends the grim fate of the *Pequod* and the autocratic designs of its captain. In Chapter 123, "The Musket," Starbuck, a Quaker in Nantucket dress, is confronted with a moral choice that challenges his earnest pacifism. The ship endures a fearsome typhoon in the deep Pacific. With chilling detail, Melville describes how the needles of the ship's compass spin with "whirling velocity" in the midst of the gale: "It is a sight that hardly anyone can behold without some sort of unwonted emotion." Like the compass, the *Pequod* is unmoored from the natural world and the laws that govern

Frank Stella, *The Funeral (Dome) From Moby Dick Domes*, 1992. Relief-printed etching, aquatint and engraving in colors on TGL handmade paper, 73 1/2 in x 53 x 6 in.

it. Like the compass, Ahab has abandoned the constellations that guide his rank and station. If Starbuck doesn't act decisively, no one will.

The storm abates, and Starbuck descends to the state-room to "appraise Captain Ahab of the circumstance." Melville takes a beat to describe the "isolated subterraneousness" of the cabin—a critique of how divorced Ahab has become from the plight of his crew. It is in this Jonahic cell, this hovel, that Starbuck finds the captain fast asleep. In a sardonic inversion of Mark 4, Ahab has slept through the perilous night. Whereas in the Gospel, Jesus sleeps as Lord of creation, and is able to calm the sea with a word, in *Moby Dick* Ahab sleeps amid a tempest that cannot match the turbulent clime of his own heart. The contrast could not be more acute. Captain Jesus awakes, discerns, and cares for his crew. Even his rebuke, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" becomes a comforting corrective for fear run amok. Captain Ahab dreams, obsesses, and declares in his sleep, "Stern all! Oh Moby Dick, I clutch thy heart at last!" Jesus abides. Ahab abandons. One preserves. The other destroys.

Mounted against the forward bulkhead of Ahab's cell is a rack of loaded muskets. "He would have shot me once," Starbuck says, observing the very musket Ahab once pointed at his face. In a rare moment of clarity, Ahab's supremacist creed ("There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord of the Pequod") faces a legitimate coup. "Starbuck was an honest man," Melville writes, "but out of Starbuck's heart, at that instant when he saw the muskets, there strangely evolved an evil thought; but so blent with its neutral or good accompaniments that for the instant he hardly knew it for itself." Murder is indeed an "evil thought," especially when it is "so blent" with the good intentions of the *Pequod's* first mate. Starbuck removes the musket, "the very musket that he pointed at me," from the rack. A single shot would bedevil Starbuck's religious conviction. A single shot could deliver the crew to the safety of Nantucket. Is mercy what stays his hand or pulls the trigger?

Starbuck assumes the posture of David before a sleeping Saul: he appraises his tyrant leader, and does not destroy him (1 Samuel 26:7–9). Ahab's dereliction aboard the *Pequod* is worthy of judgment, but Paul's mandate in Romans 13 that "every person be subject to the governing authorities" remains an inconvenient thorn in the conscience of rebel and revolutionary alike. Starbuck quests for an alternative:

> But is there no other way? No lawful way?—Make him a prisoner to be taken home? What! hope to wrest this old man's living power from his own living hands? Only a fool would try it. Say he were pinioned even; knotted all over with ropes and hawsers; chained down to ring-bolts on this cabin floor, he would be more hideous than a caged tiger, then. I could not endure the sight; could not possibly fly his howlings; all comfort, sleep itself, inestimable reason would leave me on the long intolerable voyage.

The gods may have nailed Prometheus to the Scythian cliff, but no amount of ropes and hawsers can confine the promethean will of Ahab. The mere thought of a fettered captain, "with two oceans and a whole continent between me and law," dissuades

Starbuck from incarceration. Even if Ahab were safely delivered to a New England courtroom, the primordial evil of the captain's heart speaks to a universal crisis of human nature, a crisis that does not end with a "crazed old man" in the dock. It may be fashionable to imagine that the death of today's villain leads to "happily ever after" tomorrow, but this is a Hollywood fiction. The corpse of Hitler is buried as the heir of his depravity imbibes a mother's milk. In such a world, our shared mortality becomes a grace disguised, a reliable end-stop to despotism run riot. Rather than become Nature's ambassador and resident death dealer, Starbuck lets Nature run its course. He refuses to meet Ahab's evil with a loaded musket of his own.

There are intimations of this conviction earlier in the novel. In Chapter 114, "The Gilder," the *Pequod* finds itself "under an abated sun" in "the heart of the Japanese cruising ground." Ishmael (the novel's on-again off-again narrator) observes that under such "dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that beats beneath it." Ahab responds to this paradox with melancholy. Stubb, the ship's second mate, becomes a devout Epicurean, taking an oath to always be "jolly." And Starbuck finds blessed assurance in the precepts of his Christian faith. He cannot reconcile a world where ethereal beauty comingles with predatory death, so he trusts the larger hope of God's redemptive intent.

> Loveliness unfathomable, as ever a lover saw in his young bride's eye!—Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibalism ways. Let faith oust fact; let fact oust memory: I look deep down and do believe.

In a world teeming with sharks, including the shark-toothed disposition of his captain, Starbuck fixes his eyes on the transcendent. He would rather graft himself to the habits of heaven than to the cycles of death that inform (as Ahab describes it) the "mingling threads of life…woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm." Starbuck's virtue simultaneously perceives the danger of Ahab's madness and keeps him from violent retribution. For Starbuck, what separates humanity from the sharks is not our propensity for violence, but rather our capacity to refrain from the fisticuffs long enough to love our neighbor instead:

> The yet levelled musket shook like a drunkard's arm against the panel; Starbuck seemed wrestling with an angel; but turning from the door, he placed the death-tube in its rack, and left the place.

One reading of Starbuck's mercy is that he perceives in Ahab the work of provi-

dence. Ahab becomes (like his Old Testament namesake) an instrument of God's judgment on the *Pequod*: a cautionary tale for a perishing republic. In this economy, the judgment is less against the crew members of the *Pequod* than the nation they represent. The daughters of Sodom and the firstborn sons of Egypt offer precedent for such a reckoning. In the final act of the novel, as the doomed prow of the *Pequod* sinks into the doomed port of the sea, Ahab declares: "Its wood could only be American." For Melville, this is the judgment that will befall his own nation. And is it not true that in today's age of morbid wealth, political hubris, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch the impulses of our *Pequod* ancestry remain?

A second (and perhaps more convincing) reading is to assume Starbuck's familiarity with the Parable of the Weeds. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the story of "someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away." Dismayed, the servants marshal an expedient remedy, but the owner commands them instead to ignore this agrarian sabotage and let the weeds grow up alongside the wheat. According to Fr. Robert Capon, in his major work *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, "The parable says that doing nothing is, for the time being, the preferred response to evil… it does not say that resistance to evil is morally wrong, only that it is salvifically ineffective."

Ahab's evil is a tyrannical "weed" among many, and Jesus' parable chastens us from action: "for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them." Too often, temporal attempts at justice are myopic and error-prone. The bullet strays to hit an innocent bystander. The ideological cure is administered only to kill the body politic. The Parable of the Weeds is terrible agricultural advice, but it reliably pacifies the Ahab outrage that resides in us all. Starbuck heeds Christ's counsel to "let both of them grow together until the harvest," and endeavors to be (in the words of the poet W. H. Auden) "the more loving one" with his appointed service aboard the *Pequod*.

Starbuck returns the musket to its rack, and a terrible mercy is born. It is a mercy that lets Ahab slumber as his crew contends with fear. It is a mercy that tells Peter to put his sword away as the Man of Innocence is sent to die. It is a mercy that participates in a beatitude economy made perfect: not in the will to power of finite beings, but in the infinite wisdom of a just God. And perhaps, despite the grave outcome for the *Pequod* and the lack of judgment for Ahab this side of eternity, the mercy of Starbuck apprehends a truth our nation often neglects—that the murder of God's Spirit in another is the murder of oneself.

By Elizabeth Clemmer Knowlton

Unbidden, Unearned, Uninitiated

Creating Space to Receive and Offer Mercy

I remember the experience vividly. Sometime in my mid-to-late twenties, I was awoken suddenly in the middle of the night. I wasn't particularly worried or stressed out at the time. I had recently become a bit more serious about my prayer life. My knowledge of Scripture had improved through singing in the choir and attending church regularly. That night, I sat bolt upright in my bed. Fully awake, I heard the words, "I have cleansed your heart and given you a new Spirit."

I can't tell you whether it was an audible voice or just inside my head. I mainly remember being perplexed. It was not an experience I had sought or would have expected. It's never happened again. Despite the unbidden nature of the experience, there was a lightness that accompanied it—"for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

These many years later, I recognize the message I heard as a paraphrase of Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." What remains extraordinary about that middle of the night awakening was that it was an answer to a prayer I didn't even know I had been praying.

What I experienced was not transactional. It was a pure, unearned gift. I wish I'd had an older soul in the next room, the way Samuel had Eli in the Hebrew Scriptures, to tell me to recognize that it was the Lord who was calling me. Despite my confusion, I knew something was different, and it has remained so.

At that stage in my prayer life, I thought it was my job to remove a series of impediments between myself and God. St. Teresa of Avila likens prayer to the way we receive water in the gardens of our soul. In the earliest stages, we laboriously pull each bucket of water from a well to tend that garden. As we progress, we increasingly let God do the work of growing our souls. As any gardener can attest, there is the hard, disciplined spade-work of preparation, but then you must let go and see what blooms.

Nery Gabriel Lemus, *A Prayer for MacArthur Park*, 2022. White tread on Guatemalan textile, 21 ½ x 30 in. Collection of Jarl Mohn.

I had imagined that to get closer to God, I needed to pray more, to increase the sheer number of minutes and their quality. It was a puzzle to solve rather than a relationship to be developed. Over his doorway, the psychologist Carl Jung famously had a carving in Latin that read: "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." I suspect that, given its expansive nature, mercy is one of the most transformational ways we encounter God.

I was also at a stage in my journey in which I was more focused on penance and fear of judgement than God's mercy. I was consumed with my imperfections. Years later, my wise spiritual director gently pointed out that thinking I'm beyond God's redemption, or that I was providing a particularly hard case for the Almighty, was a subtle and pernicious form of pride. True humility grounds us. We are neither too low nor too high. When we are too focused on being worthy, we can become like small children jumping up and down and waving our arms to be seen. I thought all conversations with God began with me. But it is very hard to receive the mercy of God when we are so self-conscious.

That encounter in the night shifted the paradigm. If I was willing to believe that God was willing to cross any distance to be in relationship with me, what might change? I realized not only was God willing, but God also deeply desired to be in relationship with me as His beloved child. God wasn't showing up as the school principal to punish me for stepping out of line but was clearing the decks to invite me into a new place of freedom. It also opened me to the possibility that God was much nearer than I had imagined—radically present in each moment of my life.

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I had experienced God's mercy. Mercy is unbidden, unearned, and uninitiated. It creates a space for our growth in love. In fact, if you look up "mercy" in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, the entry is: see Love. God's very nature is love, and it calls us to places of greater freedom and growth. We cannot truly love when we are afraid. Mercy has an amazing capacity to let us experience unconditional love and move away from fear and anxiety.

In my life and in the lives of those I walk with, it is striking how often shame and fear prevent spiritual growth. Acceptance and mercy are much more likely to allow us to grow in love. Often the only way we can emerge from a purely transactional way of interacting with God and our fellow travelers is to experience mercy firsthand. One does not have to have an experience like mine to know the feeling of lightness that comes when a burden lifts.

I entered seminary with two young children. There was one week that I had both a sick child and a huge Old Testament exam. My professor had a reputation for being tough, and I had brought to graduate school an intense desire to always do my very best. I never asked for extensions, and felt I had a lot to prove as a second-career student with small children.

For whatever reason, that week simply proved too much for me. I had stayed up all night studying and knew I was in no shape to take that test. I called the professor the morning of the exam and told him I wouldn't be able to be there. I hoped he'd give me a chance to make up the exam later in the week, but I was prepared to accept a zero since the syllabus clearly stated that

make up exams were not offered. I held my breath and waited for his response. He said, "Why don't you just skip the exam? We can average your other grades at the end of the semester."

What? It took me awhile to fully accept that I wasn't only being given a reprieve, but a full release. Unbidden. Unearned. Not initiated by me, save the willingness to make the phone call and admit my limits.

Mercy, of course, has implications beyond a release from the bondage of self-imposed high expectations or internalized individualism. It is an invitation to live into a wholly new way of life. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes powerfully about the journey of freedom that the Israelites experience in the Exodus. They begin with the first freedom, which is the physical release from Egypt. The wandering in the desert is what allows for a different level of that freedom and prepares them to live in a new way. The gift of the law is a community rule of life that allows us to preserve that freedom we've been given.

Mercy at its highest form is receiving grace and release when there has been a real wrong done. It is unconditional love offered when penalty is expected and appropriate.

There are many atonement theories of what Christ has accomplished on the cross. The one that has always most deeply resonated for me is that Jesus is willing to embody a radical self-giving act of love on behalf of all of humanity. It is an extravagant gift of love that we cannot match, cannot initiate, and cannot ever fully comprehend. When we know ourselves to be recipients of that love, we are free to offer it to others.

Of course, we fall short and behave in ways that we genuinely regret. Most of us don't enjoy those moments of awareness in ourselves. Growing in spiritual maturity means increasing our willingness to admit fault and be vulnerable with those we have harmed. We need to accept the consequences of our actions.

To experience mercy from God or other people in these circumstances is particularly precious, and I suspect those who grant it most easily already know themselves to have received it at other times. A friend of mine once said, "You know you've met a person of real spiritual depth when you tell them the worst things about yourself, and they are not surprised." What my friend meant was that it's not because that person assumes the worst in you; it's because they know the darkness in themselves. When we know our own darkness, we accept the darkness of others. Our capacity to offer mercy expands in direct proportion to our awareness of our own need for it.

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What are the barriers to receiving and offering mercy? Often mercy is so surprising, so outside the bounds of what seems appropriate or fair that we are initially tempted to reject it. Cultural notions of fairness often impede our ability to apprehend the gratuitous grace that comes to us in these moments. Mercy's unearned nature can be one of the biggest impediments to our accepting it.

When my son was in middle school, he engaged in some behavior that harmed a good friend of his. The mother of the child called me, not with accusation, but concern. She believed this behavior didn't reflect my son's character. She could have easily called the school and proceeded with disciplinary procedures that could have changed his en-

tire school experience. Instead, she recognized that he was under the influence of some peers. She hoped that by calling me directly, we could intervene together. This not only extended mercy to my son and our family, but it also preserved a deeply important relationship between our two children, who to this day are still close.

Initially I was so shocked I hardly knew how to react. I was embarrassed and angry that my son had behaved the way he had. When I spoke to him—at my first question—he began to cry. It became evident that he was so relieved to have been found out, despite the shame he felt. He had been carrying a heavy burden that I hadn't even seen. Mercy was the gateway to recovering himself, and it allowed him to share the burdens he had been carrying in isolation. Also, our relationship was transformed.

Personally, I had to wrestle with the opportunity to reconcile and repair my own friendship, an opportunity that I did not deserve. I felt guilty that I had been so unaware. I was embarrassed that my child had behaved in such a way. Her own child had been hurt and harmed, and yet we were being offered kindness. Later the next year, when I sat in her son's bar mitzvah ceremony, I was filled with gratitude that we had even been invited.

Giving and receiving mercy is a fluid process. We vary in our ability to receive and extend it. All true gifts of the Spirit are not just for our own edification. They build up the Body of Christ, or they are not genuine fruits of the Spirit. Boundaries of love and mercy are expanded, and abundant life has space to grow. One cannot have fully metabolized the gift of mercy if one cannot also offer it to others.

Ultimately, mercy is a characteristic of God's love that we as Christians practice. Through the gift of the incarnation, we open ourselves to the mystery of mercy. The practice of mercy can begin in small ways. When we are cut off in traffic, we can be curious about what might have caused the person to behave in that way, and we can offer a prayer for them, rather than slamming on the horn. When someone we care about hurts us, we can explore whether this is an occasion to offer mercy. This is not a call to step away from appropriate boundaries or to avoid genuine issues of justice. It presupposes that the offering of mercy is an opportunity to expand love and transformation. It creates a *possibility* for reconciliation.

The reality is that God's mercy, when received, changes our capacity to love. It is transformative because of its very nature. It is pure gift, and so it invites us to move in ways that defy calculation. It is also generative. We lose nothing by sharing it. We grow in love when we offer mercy, and we grow in love when we graciously receive it.

God's mercy is also challenging, because we often slip back into a transactional modality when we give and receive love and mercy—as in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, and the good religious people of the day are taken aback. But Jesus reminds them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

A Sermon by **David Zahl**

The Urgency of Mercy

Then one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, came and, when he saw [Jesus], fell at his feet… "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak…and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my cloak?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'"… He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

…When they came to the synagogue leader's house, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."…Taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Talitha koum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl stood up and began to walk about… (Mark 5:22–43 NRSVUE)

Music isn't the only source of harmonies. Stories, too, can harmonize, as this passage from the book of Mark illustrates so profoundly. The two healings that Christ performs complement one another. They're juxtaposed. They're intertwined. They're meant to be read together.

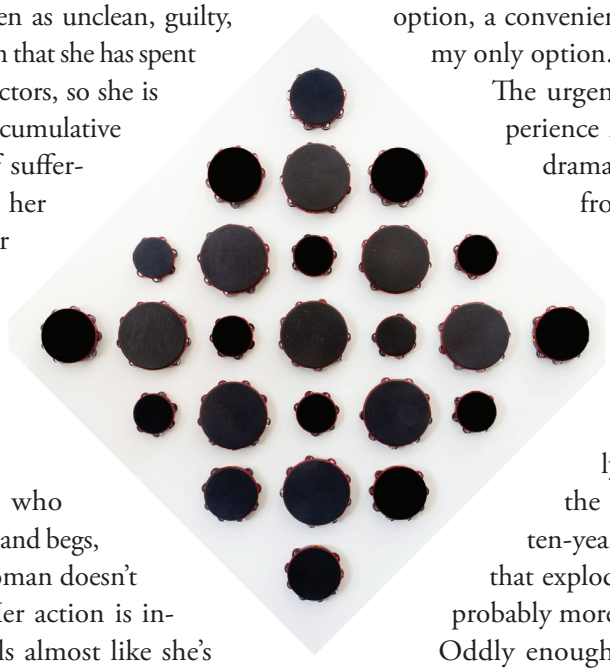
In literature, you might call this a framing narrative. There's the beginning of the story, then there's a completely separate story, and then there's the end of the first story. And when you put them together, you get something comprehensive, and very good.

The first thing that happens is that Christ comes across the Sea of Galilee. He steps foot on shore and is almost immediately accosted, or at least approached, by one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus. Jairus would have occupied a relatively high station in that society, and we meet him in a state of emergency, his daughter on the brink of death. This crisis has driven him to overcome all obstacles in order to get to Jesus—not just the physical obstacles, but the obstacles of ego and pride. The text tells us that Jairus is so humbled that he falls at Christ's feet, begging for help.

Lava Thomas, *Requiem for Charleston*, 2016. Tambourines, pyrographic calligraphy on lambskin, acrylic discs and braided trim, overall: 76 × 77 × 2 3⁄8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Nion McEvoy, 2017.4A-Y, © 2016, Lava Thomas.

But before they get far, the second thing happens. A woman—they don't even mention her name, an indication of her lowly status—approaches Jesus and touches the hem of his garment.

This woman clearly sits at the opposite end of the social hierarchy from Jairus. Moreover, she has been suffering some kind of hemorrhaging or chronic bleeding for twelve years, which would've disqualified her not only from marriage but from religious favor. She would've been seen as unclean, guilty, worn out. We learn that she has spent all she had on doctors, so she is poor as well. The cumulative effect of years of suffering has brought her to the end of her rope, such that she barges through the crowds and grabs hold of Jesus' robe.



Unlike Jairus, who prostrates himself and begs, this unnamed woman doesn't ask: she takes. Her action is interruptive. It feels almost like she's stealing power. Jesus stops and says: Who did that? Who took power from me? The disciples do what they do best and act incredulous.

While the two figures come from opposite places and in opposite ways, there's also something similar about their stories. First of all, in both cases, Christ comments on the strength of their faith. Their faith is born in desperation. It does not flow from their own virtue, but from their need, which is urgent.

I was reminded of the memoir Heather Kopp wrote, *Sober Mercies*. Heather, a mom of three, working in Christian publishing, suffered from chronic alcoholism. In the book she recalls the desperation she felt after her first relapse. She thought she'd gone to rehab and gotten better, but then she found herself drinking in a closet one day. "I couldn't remember experiencing true spiritual desperation," she writes, "until I admitted that I was a hopeless, helpless alcoholic. Up until that day when I fell on my knees, God's grace had been a nice option, a convenient option, but not my only option."

The urgency you and I experience in life may be the dramatic kind that arises from an out-of-the-blue crisis, like a sick child or a sudden reversal at work. But it could equally be a slow burn, the kind of a five- or ten-year simmering issue that explodes one day. That's probably more common.

Oddly enough, in Jairus's case, Christ puts him on pause, and in doing so appears to fail him: Jairus's daughter dies. We are taken aback.

Both parties also encounter resistance. Their faith, which is the seed of their healing, is met with opposition, incredulity, and interference. Crowds form and get in the way. Why trouble the teacher further, the bystanders tell Jairus, now that your daughter has died? This strikes me as true to life today. The people surrounding Christ are often the ones who seem to be most inconvenienced by the fact people that want

to *and are* getting healed. Those of us most closely associated with Jesus often make it harder, not easier, to reach the man himself. We have our protocols and timetables that must be followed before help is provided. Desperate faith makes us uncomfortable.

So both stories feature desperation and resistance. But there's a third similarity between them, perhaps the most important one: They yield the same result. In both instances—the asking as well as the taking, the high status as well as the low, the innocent as well as the guilty—the people are healed. They are given a way forward. In the case of Jairus's daughter, this entails a physical resurrection. In the case of the anonymous woman, it's a spiritual one. The unclean is made clean. Urgency is the engine of healing faith.

Many of us witnessed a powerful instance of urgent need being met with miraculous mercy in 2015. I am referring to the shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, in which twenty-one-year-old white supremacist Dylann Roof shot and killed nine Black parishioners in the middle of their weekly Bible study. Well, I'm actually talking about what happened *after* the horrific incident.

Now I'm a person who gets up and talks about love and mercy all the time, yet I was completely floored by the glimpse of almost otherworldly faith I heard and saw. Maybe you were too. At the bail hearing, when Nadine Collier, whose seventy-year-old mother was shot, addressed Roof, she said, "You took something very precious away from me. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but if God forgives you, I forgive you." Her sentiments were echoed by just about everyone affected by this tragedy.

The truth is, the members and the relatives of the victims schooled us in what Christianity is really about. They showed us what it means to show mercy amid deserved judgment. They taught us what grace actually looks like: a kind of kneejerk outpouring that can only come from people who have heard Psalm 130 over and over again, and actually believe it.

> O Israel, hope in the Lord!
> For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
> and with him is plenteous
> redemption.

With him is plenteous redemption. In him there is forgiveness of sin. The brother of Cynthia Graham Hurd, one of the ladies killed, said to the *Washington Post*, "Having her in church that night at Bible study taught me about the Lord. If we had to lose our sister, losing her in church was the right place. She was in the company of God. She was trying to help somebody. She was not a victim. She was a Christian." Can you imagine saying something like that ever, especially in these circumstances?

Needless to say, their response was met with incredulity in some circles. Surely these family members were jumping too quickly to forgiveness? What about accountability? Some commentators went so far as to dismiss the forgiveness as a trauma-induced survival mechanism, i.e., Black absolution of White terror as a conditioned response to centuries of oppression that only ends up enabling more of the same. We cannot let people off the hook, lest we perpetuate further violence and hate.

I sympathize with such hesitancy. Truly, I do. The desperation for justice must not be devalued in the name of love.

But I also wonder if we want to write Collier's words off because they are too radical. In a column for the *Wall Street Journal* afterward, Peggy Noonan wrote, "The 'confounding forgiveness' given voice at that bail hearing, the 'radical love' contained in those statements was not cultural, sociological, or political. It was theological. It was about Jesus Christ." She quoted writer Michael Wear, who said, "They did not forgive to express the values of their race or to represent the character of their country, but to be faithful to their God." The church members could hardly have made that clearer in those statements.

Perhaps the members of Emanuel understood that to claim God forgives at a time like this is to claim that, unlike us, God is gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Perhaps they understood the urgency of witnessing—at precisely such times—to something more powerful than sin, guilt, hurt, shame, and revenge. After all, guilt and fear lead us to protect and to defend ourselves. Grace is the only thing that ever allows a person to look at how they themselves buttress societal forces that make such a horrific thing possible. We are freed to acknowledge our own complicity in such wrongs, not from a place of guilt, but from a place of gratitude. It's no coincidence that the healing that has occurred in the wake of these remarkable statements has been swift and conflict-free and profoundly hopeful.

What I'm saying is: those brave souls at Emanuel testified to the immortal truth that God's mercy is not reserved for the righteous. It is not reserved for lesser forms of wrongdoing or only personal forms of wrongdoing. The stunning, offensive thing about the grace of God is that it is not dependent on context. Which means it is not dependent on you. It is dependent only on Jesus Christ himself. His grace meets both the askers and the takers, the high born and the low, the privileged and the oppressed, the guilty and the innocent, in both tragedy and transgression.

The grace of God does not wait for the correct response. It produces the correct response.

Maybe this morning you have something urgent going on in your life. Maybe there's a crisis that has brought you to church. More likely you're sitting on something that's been boiling for a long time and you're afraid may explode someday. Maybe it's systemic in nature, maybe it's purely individual. You may be the victim, you may be the perpetrator. But I'm here to tell you that the way Jesus met those two sufferers is the way the families of those victims met Dylann Roof. It's the way that Christ greets you in your own desperation, your own urgency, which is not with recompense but with plenteous redemption.

Of course, his timing may not be what you want it to be. It may be more like what it was with Jairus than with the woman who touched Christ's robe. But God's mercy does not depend on context. The way forward for you, and for all of us, depends only on the Father of Mercies himself, the one who, while we are faithless, is faithful. Amen.

Requiem for Charleston honors the nine men and women who died in the shooting on June 17, 2015, inside the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Tambourines with black lambskin heads are inscribed with the victims' names, while the drums of others are made of polished black acrylic that reflect the faces of viewers, suggesting the collective tragedy of the attack. Artist Lava Thomas chose to memorialize the dead with tambourines because of their cultural and historical significance, particularly their role in African American musical traditions—including protest songs of the Civil Rights era. In the days following the Charleston massacre, tambourines, cymbals, and bells rang throughout the community as a call for unity and support. Here the instruments hang motionless, in silent tribute to the lives lost.

KATELYN BEATY is the author most recently of the book *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church* and serves as editorial director of Brazos Press. An Ohio native living in Brooklyn, she enjoys karaoke, birdwatching, travel, and being a part of Calvary St. George's Episcopal Church.

BILL BORROR is a pastor and an occasional professor. He and his wife live in Vermont where he pastors the First Congregational Church of Manchester, and where they are also active members of Israel Congregation Synagogue. Feeling convicted by this issue's theme, they mercifully allowed a family of raccoons to live under their porch until they were old enough to leave.

TODD BREWER is the managing editor of the Mockingbird website, mbird.com, where he also regularly writes about theology, the New Testament, and this crazy thing called divine mercy.

JOHN CASTEEN is the author of two collections of poems, *Free Union* and *For the Mountain Laurel*. Recent or forthcoming poems appear in *The Southern Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Best American Poetry*. He has contributed personal and topical nonfiction to *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other magazines and newspapers. He lives in Earlysville, Virginia, and teaches poetry at the University of Virginia.

DIANNE B. COLLARD is a missionary, international author and speaker, and a creative catalyst for the purpose of "nurturing the souls of the artists." She serves as the Europe Ministries Director for A.C.T. International, and also has a local ministry focus for artists. She and her husband live in Charlotte, NC. She is the author of *I Choose to Forgive: An Intimate Journey with God*. She may be contacted at www.montageinternational.org.

SARAH CONDON was late to the idea of mercy. And she wishes she could have had it earlier in her marriage and motherhood. Thankfully her husband and children are merciful.

KENDALL COX is a professor, writer, artist, and mother. The author of *Prodigal Christ: A Parabolic Theology*, she lives with her seven-year-old on the Philadelphia Main Line.

BRYAN JARRELL is Mockingbird's social media manager, husband to Beth, father of Tom and Audrey, walker of Ginger, and the rector of Epiphany Anglican Fellowship in Ligonier, PA. His initial contribution to the magazine, "Have Mercy: Uncle Jesse and the Gospel According to *Full House*" was rejected outright by the editors, but may one day be available as an e-book.

MARCI RAE JOHNSON works as an editor for a book publisher, and in her previous life, she taught college English. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *Image, Moon City Review, Main Street Rag, The MacGuffin, Rhino, The Louisville Review,* and *32 Poems*, among others. She is the author of two full-length books from small presses, and one chapbook.

BETH KNOWLTON is an Episcopal priest at St. Mark's Church in downtown San Antonio who loves contemplating the presence of the holy in everyday life. She learns about grace and mercy on a daily basis from her dog, Chalupa!

ORREY MACFARLAND is a Lutheran pastor and adjunct seminary professor. He lives in Edmond, OK, with his wife, two young daughters, and a lovable but unmerciful cat.

JOSHUA MACKIN is a writer and creative strategist based in Jersey City, NJ. He's a husband and father to two girls and one (in utero) baby boy, and he sets his clock by them.

KELSEY MARDEN is a writer whose day job is to tell the powerful stories of refugees and people displaced by some of the world's worst crises. When she's not doing that, you can find her running through Washington, DC, conquering her fear of falling at a bouldering gym, or aimlessly wandering around a bookstore. Her work has appeared in *BmoreArt*, *Baltimore Jewish Times*, and *Baltimore* magazine.

AVERY REED is an author and illustrator who recently relocated from New York City to Camden, ME. She and her husband love all things outdoors and are constantly praying for mercy as they raise their wild and wonderful two-year-old. Find more of her work at averyreedstudio.com or on Instagram at @averyreedstudio.

MEAGHAN RITCHEY is the managing editor of *The Mockingbird* magazine and director of communications for Bridge Projects, a non-profit serving artists at the intersection of contemporary art and religion. Spending too much time in airport terminals, she has begun to find mercy in the form of a dirty gin martini and cheeseburger combo.

After decades of moving from place to place, **BENJAMIN SELF** is savoring the many everyday mercies of community and family life alongside his wife Hannah and one-year-old daughter Lucy in leafy Charlottesville, VA. He is currently the sexton at Christ Episcopal Church, and, when not loafing around at home, often tries to squeeze in a little creative work on the side.

FRANCIS SPUFFORD wrote the notoriously sweary case for Christian faith, *Unapologetic*, and has been a friend of Mockingbird for ten years now. These days he mostly writes novels. His next one, *Cahokia Jazz*, comes out from Scribner in February 2024.

BRIAN VOLCK is a pediatrician and writer living in Baltimore. Among his vices, for which his wife repeatedly forgives him, are obsessive gardening and the buying of many books.

JEREMIAH WEBSTER teaches literature and writing at Northwest University. When he isn't contemplating the "terrible mercy" of *Moby Dick*, he searches for the ghost of John Muir along the alpine trails of the Cascade Mountains. His books include a volume of poetry, *After So Many Fires*, and a novel, *Follow the Devil / Follow the Light*.

MISCHA WILLETT is the poet responsible for *The Elegy Beta* and *Phases*, as well as an assortment of essays on cultural and theological topics. In His great mercy, the Lord has arranged things such that he lives in the Pacific Northwest where he teaches Shakespeare, C. S. Lewis, and poetry at Seattle Pacific University. Mischa is grateful all the time.

DAVID ZAHL is the director of Mockingbird, editor-in-chief of the Mockingbird website, and co-host of *The Mockingcast*. A longtime devotee of mercy the noun (especially when it pertains to him), he's also a big fan of its adverb form. As in, a mercifully easy assignment, or a mercifully affordable lunch, or, best of all, a mercifully short sermon. Or bio.

COMING NEXT

THE MYSTERY ISSUE