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This Holy Land: A Young Believer's Search for True Faith in Evangelical Christian Subculture

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This Holy Land

A Young Believer's Search for True Faith in Evangelical Christian Subculture

Lauren Ash
Honors Thesis
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Introduction: On Seeking

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

—Matthew 7:7(NIV)

Jesus says seek and you will find, and I have been seeking.

On a Friday afternoon in seventh period Bible class, the teacher drew the blinds and turned the lights off. I was wearing my least favorite uniform skirt—the pleated khaki one that shifted around my waist and shimmied down when I walked—and I straightened it out under my desk because it was bunching around my legs. The projector came alive and glowed. We were watching an abortion.

It was the 1984 pro-life documentary *The Silent Scream*. We had already watched a grainy ultrasound of a fetus floating in shades of gray in the womb, the narrator’s voice droning the promise that *We are going to watch a child being torn apart, dismembered, disarticulated, crushed and destroyed*.

Then we weren’t watching the ultrasound anymore, we were watching the abortionist bent between the woman’s legs with the vacuum. There was a digital, censorship oval between her legs, but I still thought I was seeing *too much* of everything. She was naked from the waist down. Pale legs bent and spread, splayed in the stirrups. I thought, just briefly, they looked like the stiffened legs of a dead animal stretched out on its back waiting to be gutted.

The silence in the room was thick and nearly reverent in its awkwardness. Heavy with horror, revulsion, discomfort, sympathy, fear. There was a faint swish of khaki fabric on fabric as students shifted in their seats. My tongue felt too big for my mouth and my throat went dry. Squeamish and uncomfortable with the sight of blood, I moved my eyes to the side of the screen and told myself to breathe.

The vacuum vibrated the woman's lower half and shook her legs. We watched red flow from a tube into a large glass container—clear so they would know that nothing, the narrator told us, was left behind. The abortionist moved efficiently, mechanically probing with the vacuum. Images flashed across the screen: small piles of blood-slicked flesh, a fetus flailing on an ultrasound as a vacuum poked at it and sucked it away piece by piece. When it was over, the blinds over the windows came up again and we blinked against the sudden light. Someone behind me whispered, *I'm never going to be able to stop seeing her legs.*

I still haven't stopped seeing her legs. As a part of my Christian education, in another Bible class two years earlier, we watched a documentary on exorcisms that showed a crowd of people screaming the power of Jesus over a convulsing, demon-possessed preteen, and I still haven't stopped seeing the girl's wild eyes rolling back in her skull. We watched a documentary where a woman with a distorted voice and blacked-out face was interviewed about her time as a bride of Satan, and I still haven't stopped seeing the deep hole of her outline where a person should have been.

I sought God in the fetus disappearing into the suction tube. I sought God in the trembling legs of the woman, in the curved back of the abortionist, in the convulsing girl with the lurching eyes, in the blackened silhouette of a woman who'd married the devil. I sought God in debates and articles and books that told me *This is the way to believe, this is the way to live.* I practiced defending my faith against an imaginary atheist adversary in the mirror: *Have you ever watched an abortion? Have you ever studied the impossible complexity of the human eye? I have. I have. And let me tell you, what they all say is true.* I held the facts close in case someone ever asked me why I believed in God and the Bible, but no one ever did and the only one who asked was me.

I was guilty of sneering at doubting Thomas, who refused to believe Jesus had resurrected until he touched the holes in His hands and side, but I think of all the disciples Thomas was the one I understood the most. I wanted to see with my own eyes and touch with my own hands—the words of someone else were not solid enough for me to grasp. I borrowed the apologetics of others like I borrowed their faith. *This is the way to believe, this is the way to live.*

I wanted to explode and catch the fire that sent martyrs to upside-down crosses and burning stakes. I wanted something to move within me, to tell me that I had a spirit creatively designed and placed inside. I wanted the ecstasy that moved saints to tear their clothes, to pour ashes upon their heads and let it rain onto their shoulders like God was remaking them in the same dust he made Adam. I harbored an ugly secret: that I had not yet found God in the fetus as it was sucked away, had not found Him in a child's rolling eyes, had not found Him in the silhouette of a broken woman. I had yet to find Him on Sunday morning, yet to find Him in a crackling church camp bonfire, yet to find Him in the grace we spoke around the dinner table.

I borrowed faith, but it never filled me. Not something to live for. Not something to die for. If they were to lay me bare and expose me, what would they find? Sometimes, while sitting in church my eyes would stay open during prayer, and I let my mind slip daringly into thoughts of what life would be like if I gave it all up. *So, I thought, if there comes a chance to leave it all behind, would I?*

Introduction: A Note to the Reader

I was raised in the nondenominational, Evangelical Christian tradition. It's a tradition perhaps best known by those outside of it for its subculture of right-leaning politics, homophobia, white saviorism, sex-shaming, etc., etc. I need not go on.

But there were good things there too, and good people who were filled with love and compassion. I loved my faith a lot of the time. I loved that we served the poor and lived in gratitude and visited the elderly. I just couldn't ignore the way we also hurt people and made them feel as though they didn't have a place with us. Sometimes my faith felt more like a spiritual country club than a rescue mission open to anyone.

I did practice defending my faith against an imaginary atheist adversary in the mirror, who all along was me. I was fighting my own disbelief, not because I wanted to convince someone else my faith was real, but because I needed to convince myself that what I had been raised to believe was true. I became the very thing I feared: a person who asked too many questions. After 21 years of church-going and praying and blessing and worshiping, I had absolutely no idea why I did any of it at all.

My second year of college, I was on the verge of putting faith away forever and finally reached a tipping point where I stood in the hallway of my apartment and offered God a classic romance movie ultimatum: "Either You show up, or I go." I was tired of following the rules and holding my hands out to a God I wasn't sure was even there. Years of striving to be a good Christian had left me feeling confused and inadequate. I dragged my faltering faith with me into a prayer session on a Sunday night—a final chance for God to show up in a way I could see Him. At the prayer session, one of the women praying over me stopped mid-prayer, made me look at

her, her face swimming into focus through my tears, and told me, “If you want breakthrough, you have to unlearn everything you were taught.”

She was instructing me to walk backwards and unravel a lifetime of Christian education and Christian living to get to the heart of God and the gospel. Perhaps God had left me or never been there at all, but I had become too blinded by religion and a code of lifestyle ethics to see Him. Growing up in the Evangelical Christian tradition, Scripture had been interpreted for me by my parents, teachers, and pastors. I was told what to believe and why in the same breath I was taught right from wrong.

When I left home for the first time, I was suddenly able to choose where to go to church, whether or not to go to church, and which parts of my religion I wanted to take and leave. With this newfound freedom, I didn't have parents, teachers, and pastors telling me what was good and bad. I had to decide for myself. When young believers leave home, the stats tell us many also leave church. When it came to me reaching this place, all of my doubts came to a head and I wasn't educated on how to work through them. I panicked. What if all this time I had wasted my life following something untrue?

The idea I heard batted around in sermons that concerned the church's worry for its young people was always that the youth didn't like church because we disliked the rules. We disliked being told what to do. We liked pre-marital sex and secular culture. We liked our music, our way of dressing and dancing. We were rebellious back-talkers, rowdy questioners. We burned for independence and sin. We had a hard time overcoming our temptations.

The answer was to make church more fun and cool to draw us in and keep us out of trouble. To dress the message up in a fresh way and offer snacks and games. The mission, it felt, was to keep kids in church until our tumultuous adolescence was over and we settled into a more

calm, adult routine—one that included the stability of church. When it came down to whether or not I would abandon the faith of my childhood, however, there were no snack machines, games, fog machines, or strobe lights in the world that could have convinced me to change my mind.

I didn't so much lose faith all at once as I slipped quietly from a pew, so quietly I barely noticed I was even going. There isn't a particular event I could point a finger at and proclaim, "THIS is what first sent me spiraling into doubt and disbelief!" I would describe it more as a series of events, conversations, ideas, and questions that got under my skin and made me go, *Huh. That doesn't quite make sense.* The games we played were no more than games, and it all felt like one big, showy game to me. I came to connect with the divine and left instead with a cheesy 365-day devotional I would barely touch and an invite to Bible study where we talked about living for Jesus the right way.

I got it in my head that I had to have faith before I wrote about it, and faith was something I could never hold securely in my hands. More fluid than solid, it seeped through my fingers and I was never sure if I had it or not. But why not write about something I don't completely have? Why not look for it? Why not try to hold it? In trying, I just might get somewhere.

This collection of essays is not a sermon from a pulpit. I'm in the congregation. Sometimes I'm not even through the church doors. This is the progress of a wayward pilgrim. It's a personal pilgrimage, and you're welcome to join, take what resonates and leave the rest. I'm not here to convert anyone. If anything, it's possible nobody is going to want anything to do with church once I'm done. My only hope is to come to a greater understanding of the religion I was raised in, why it never filled me, how it has affected me on a deeper level, and explore how I

reached the point of nearly leaving it all behind. Even more so, why I didn't, and how I found faith on my own terms.

I also hope that through exploring my own religion I will learn how it impacts the culture around me and individual lives on a grander scale. I'll hopefully find some goodness woven throughout too, and maybe even some on the other side of it. I'm not offering solutions. I don't have any solutions. Exploration is the objective. The process of seeking is more painstaking than I originally thought, not instantaneous at all. I watched an abortion when I was eighteen and thought that must be what faith was: a desperate fight to preserve our way of life against a brutal exposé of humanity.

But one Tuesday morning in college, my humanities professor pulled up a blurry, Reynolds-yellow photograph of a crucifix taken by Andres Serrano. He asked what we saw, and I spun some lovely answer about seeing a Savior, about seeing Him suffer so that I may be free. The professor then explained that this was a crucifix immersed in the photographer's urine, and it was called "Immersion (Piss Christ)." He asked what we thought about it now, and we were quiet until someone in the back said, "He needs to drink more water."

That Jesus steeped in messy humanity is more real to me than a polished one. I think my religion tends to clean Jesus up and make Him presentable and palatable to the modern Christian. I think somewhere along the line we forgot that Jesus rarely hung out with the wholesome religious folks, and when He did, He usually told them to quit being white-washed walls. More often than not, Jesus was down in the dirt with adulterers, He was sitting at the same table as tax collectors, He was in the thick throngs of sick and sinful and dirty people. Everybody was welcome, and nobody was left behind.

I wasn't sure I'd met that Jesus yet. But to me, that was a Jesus—and a faith—worth seeking.

Birthplace

(n.) Place of birth or origin.

Sanctuary

“Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, ‘My God, my All’? Do you desire nothing but Him? Are you happy in God?”

—John Wesley, *The Almost Christian*¹

At church camp we played a game where I had to kneel on my hands and knees to get as many Good & Plenty candies into my mouth as possible (without using hands) from a communal plate on the ground. Then I had to run my mouthful—gagging, because it was hard to run with a full mouth of candy—across a field to spit them into a bowl on the other side. I felt like a grazing cow chomping up the candy, then like a cartoon character with bulging eyes as I ran, and finally thought I would puke when spitting the Good & Plenty into the bowl, because several of my teammates had already spit their mouthfuls before me and had left a messy pile of slimy candy and white- and pink-colored saliva.

I was still feeling queasy from the aftertaste of Good & Plenty, so there was no way I would be participating in the next game. That was the one where you had to pick up a marshmallow from the ground with your teeth, swirl it around a plate of mustard, and run it across the field again to place it on a marshmallow/mustard pyramid (without using hands). I didn't like mustard. But someone had to take my marshmallow, to make the race fair across the teams. That's when the heroic boy with his angelic blond curls stepped up, agreeing to take my marshmallow and the marshmallows of a few others. It was only when he was down on all fours in the grass, gagging after running the first few marshmallows that he admitted he couldn't stand the taste of mustard.

¹ John Wesley, “The Almost Christian,” Sermon 2, Thomas Jackson, ed. (1872), Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University, on 25 July 1741, <https://jacobjuncker.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/wesley-sermons-on-several-occasions.pdf>.

I loved church camp. There were cabins with bunk beds. Trust falls, ziplines, canoes, and kayaks. Watermelons coated in Vaseline and chucked into the lake for everyone to fight over. A gigantic, inflatable float dubbed “The Blob” on the lake that flung someone too high every year. A tarp water slide that went over rocks down the side of a hill. A canteen where we traded hole punches on our snack cards for food, where every year someone ate the long twizzler rope that would send them to the toilets the rest of the day. Our towels never dried no matter how long we hung them. It was a barbarous paradise. There was no ideological point to any of it—the games, the somewhat dangerous dives, the bobbing watermelons—but the name of fun.

When we weren’t busy throwing ourselves out of kayaks into cloudy lake water, we gathered in prayer circles for devotions and breakout groups. We were given carabiners shaped like crosses that we would spend the week earning charms for by memorizing and reciting Bible verses. A childhood spent in Christian school had trained me well for verse memorization, and I took home a handful of charms that clinked together when I moved my carabiner. Spoils from the week usually included Christian merch like t-shirts with the week’s theme emblazoned on the front and W.W.J.D. bracelets that would remind us to always ask: *What would Jesus do?* before acting.

These were the people I went to church with each Sunday. The youth pastor who shouted us on as we carried mouthfuls of candy across a field was the same youth pastor who delivered a message every week and hosted the youth group each Wednesday night. The campers taking turns dunking each other in the pool were friends I’d played carpet ball with before Sunday school for years. Somehow though, we came spiritually alive when we left our student ministry building and went to church camp.

At night, daylight decorum went out the window. Night was a space made for letting confession and emotion loose. From my log bench I looked around a bonfire at those gathered, their small, tear-streaked faces tinged in an eerie orange glow. One night a counselor stood and told a story of a close friend who had died and the girl sitting next to me on the log bench howled a sob and threw her arms around me. I wasn't sure what it had to do with the lesson we were learning, but I leaned into the friend anyway and let sadness wash over me.

On one of my last nights at camp we had worship in the auditorium, and I sang harder than I had all week. Every year our youth pastor would warn us the fire we felt for God at camp wouldn't last if we didn't work to make it last. I would vow to read my Bible every day and only listen to Christian music, but I would inevitably forget. I shoved the W.W.J.D. bracelets and memory verse charms into a drawer and forgot about them. When I went home I was no longer surrounded by prayer circles and morning devotions with my friends. I didn't have worship each night and sermons every day. I would be swept back into the ordinary routines and I would forget what it was like to feel this way: this alive. There was nothing beyond this.

A tear tracked its way down my cheek during one of the final songs. I went to dry my eyes in the bathroom and thought, *God, is that you?* I so badly wanted it to be. I wanted to be the camper who knew this God well. Whose fire continued burning long after she left church camp. Sometimes I felt like I only knew the god of church camp: the one who showed up in loud worship songs shouted into the ether, who came to the bonfire where we sat confessing.

I was sustained by moving from sanctuary to sanctuary. From church camp, to retreats, to lock-ins at church. Ten years after I went to church camp for the last time, I went on a spiritual leadership retreat. I was the first one out of the cabin one morning, letting my foot catch the door to quiet its creak on my way out. My shoes crunched against the gravel path as I walked toward

the cafeteria where we would meet later that morning. I sat on the porch alone, 40 minutes early to anywhere. The grass sparkled with dew, and the humidity of Tennessee August left me feeling sticky and hoping the mosquitoes wouldn't decide to eat me alive before the sun fully cleared the treeline. I felt like a ten-year-old at church camp again.

The only other people around were the grandparents who came from family camp, who had gotten up early to seek coffee. I pulled out a journal and tapped my pen against the page. I wasn't bothered by the mosquitoes or humidity, so much as by the fact that I had yet to tap a spiritual breakthrough on this retreat. I was still waiting on a spiritual high, on the closeness between souls that seemed to come when heaven drew near as we sang together around a bonfire. Had I exhausted my allotment of spiritual encounters already?

While I doodled my fears into a journal, two retreaters came and sat down on the porch. One asked what I was reading. "Oh," I said, "I'm not. I'm writing."

"No," he said, pointing to my open Bible. "What are you reading?" I looked down at my lap and realized I had opened my Bible to support my journal as I wrote in it. I wasn't reading anything.

"I'm not," I said again, aware of how lame it sounded. *Why yes, I am on a church retreat. But evidently I didn't come to read my Bible or talk to God.*

Maybe I didn't know how. When it came to the Holy Spirit, I sought sanctuary in people and places. I sought to replace spirit with something less abstract, something easier to know. I could know people. I could know their names and see how they listened to me and cared for me. I could know the halls of a building, its walls and doors and the way they trembled during worship as though in reverence.

A sanctuary was a place of refuge and safety. A holy place. A place I went to seek spiritual fulfillment and feel the presence of God. *Why was I here?* I was waiting, I realized, for someone to deliver on that fulfillment. When I failed to deliver my own fulfillment, I sought more. Someone once told me that some people only believe that they believe in God. I wondered if that was true of me. Did I believe in God even when I was alone? Or was this faith something others had decided for me, something I clung to because I wanted to be a part of the community they had?

The retreator turned away to speak with someone else before I could tell him I was not reading my Bible because I did not know how to find God between the pages.

On the one hand, I wanted to stand up from the porch and scream into the humid air that I was a fake. I didn't know what I was doing at all—I read my Bible and knew verses and worship songs by heart, but they were nothing more than words. I wanted someone to see me and know that, and to tell me that it was okay, that I wasn't a failed Christian, that there was a way to be better. On the other hand, the part of me that craved sanctuary snaked a hand over the mouth of the desperate side. *Hush. Have you lost your mind? This is your life. This faith is a part of it. For goodness sake, you're in a position of spiritual leadership. What would people say if they knew you had these thoughts?* Maybe this is just what faith is. I just needed to keep trying—that would be enough.

I held my mouth shut. Little by little, people started to fill the porch, settling on steps and nearby benches. None of us said anything. We sat with our Bibles and journals open: reading, writing, thinking, praying. I looked down at the random page my Bible had fallen open to: a psalm. I concentrated on the words and waited to be filled.

Faithful

“I tell you this/ to break your heart, /by which I mean only/ that it break open and never close again/ to the rest of the world.”

— *Mary Oliver, “Lead”*

I learned faith through my mother’s habitual clasping of her hands, through her eyes fluttering closed and her head bowing forward toward the dinner table. Through her singing, “Hiya, hiya, lift Jesus hiya hiya!” while showing me how to throw my hands above my head in praise. I learned faith through her notebook filled with swirling handwriting, left open on the kitchen table next to her leatherbound Bible, slowly coming undone with time and use. I learned faith through her fingers automatically tuning the car radio to a Christian station every morning on the way to school as I swung my legs in my car seat and memorized the words to the songs without meaning to.

I learned that faith breathed in and out like something alive. It moved to grasp the hands of strangers as we stood to pray. It sang even when it didn’t feel like it, because God was worthy of praise even when we didn’t feel worthy to bring it. It blessed meals and took food to the hungry. It packed shoeboxes full of Christmas gifts for children we would never meet.

My grandfather was a minister for many years. He began his aircraft repair business out of the living room of his parsonage, where he set up a sawhorse and put my grandmother to work bucking rivets. They left the ministry when the business took off, and took to the skies to grasp that elusive American dream. My mother was packed up with the parsonage and moved to rural Indiana where she dreamed her own dream of leaving the sleepy town in the rearview mirror and going somewhere with real life and a mall.

One day she did move away and met my father, a city boy who had never seen a peach pit in real life because he’d only eaten peaches from cans. He was a backsliding Catholic she

refused to marry until he converted to her Christian faith. He was baptized in the church they would marry in: the one with wooden pews and burnt orange carpet. My mother carried calla lilies down the aisle the same pure, creamy shade as her wedding dress.

Faith was the way we found our way to each other. Without it there would be no parsonage to first house a dream. There would be no trusting leap into aircraft mechanics. There would be no disillusioned girl who dreamed of big cities. There would be no boy who loved her enough to follow her to church. Without it there would be no me. Most of the time I am glad for it. I am glad I grew up learning to hold the hands of strangers and worship a God filled with grace.

But there are places where this faith and I butt heads. My grandfather's proud faith sees everything within reach. God helps those who help themselves. He cannot fathom that even if he came from the same dirt as others, there were additional barriers in their way that were removed for him. The American Dream is clothed in white.

I loved my cousin enough to fly out to her college graduation with just my grandparents and my mother. It was like traveling with an AARP convention. Nobody moved fast. Everybody had to use the bathroom. When, by some miraculous intervention we reached the Detroit airport, we sat down for a moment to wait for our next flight and my grandfather raised a hand and pointed to an advertisement on the wall behind me that depicted a Black man and a white woman together. He pointed to me, then, and wagged his finger.

"What?" I asked.

My mother leaned toward me. "He's telling you that's not okay."

"What, interracial marriage?" I said. "Grandpa! That is so racist!"

I waited for my mother to join my defense, to say something to her father—the former minister—but she said nothing. I could have shaken her in that moment, begging her to tell me why she held onto the beliefs of her father. I have a difficult time understanding how it is possible for faith and such convictions to co-exist within the same mind. There is a picture of a dark-skinned boy my mother keeps on a table in the house. His name is Israel and he lives in Haiti. My parents have been financially supporting him through a charity there for years. My mother prays for him at dinnertime. She sends him toys at Christmas. She puts his cards and drawings up on a board next to pictures of my grandparents and cousins.

In the summertime Louisville exploded with riots for a Black woman who shouldn't have died in her bed, in the middle of the night, by an attack intended for someone else. My mother kept the news on all day long for days and days. She was afraid of what they would do. They were violent. They shouldn't be so angry. She wondered if they would come to where we were, safely tucked away in the suburbs.

In the summertime my grandfather began to die in the span of days. Cancer had been born in his pancreas and grown into his skeleton. They found it in his muscles. They found it in his brain. When she heard the news my mother became a wraith who wandered through rooms in the house, emerging with puffy, wet eyes. She began drinking in last moments, attempting to fill her eyes with images of her father and wrap her fingers securely around the memory of his voice, his pale scalp through wispy hairs, his bony wrists protruding from beneath shirt sleeves, his hands with the gold band growing loose on his ring finger. Now, she couldn't take a picture of him without crying. This was the man who removed splinters from palms with tweezers and a great big bottle of rubbing alcohol. Who blew on marshmallows that caught fire while making s'mores for his grandchildren. Who baptized my younger sister in a summer pond. Who urged an

aging pickup truck over a snowbank with a good-natured, “Come on Beulah, hoist your skirts.” Who flirted with my grandmother still, after 62 years, as though they were still in high school.

My mother began driving back and forth from Louisville to the sleepy town in northern Indiana on the weekends. From city to countryside and back again. On the side of the road she passed fallow stretches of land and corn fields that turned the landscape a rich emerald green as the weeks crawled on. She brought my grandfather bags of chips to eat when he woke up in the middle of the night hungry and in pain, and cushions to sit on during the long, slow hours of chemotherapy. When she came home, she sagged into my father’s arms and whispered into his shoulder, “It’s so hard.”

When I went up to Indiana with her, I sat by my grandfather while he watched the news with vacant eyes. I looked at the backs of his hands, the skin as translucent now as the pages of my mother’s worn, leatherbound Bible. Those hands built my childhood toy chest. They taught me how to hold a gun, take aim, and pull the trigger. I didn’t want to hold a gun or shoot anything. What my grandfather did not know, and would never know, was how far I had drifted from our family tree. For so long I had equated biblical beliefs with lifestyle beliefs the way I was taught to. To be faithful meant to believe, live, and vote a certain way. Twist the Bible so it fit the way we wanted, like a hand-me-down dress taken in and let out as it was passed from family member to family member. I wouldn’t risk him turning blame on my mother for the way I fell away from their beliefs, thinking it her fault this legacy did not fit me.

I would not tell my mother either. She carried me into church for the first time when I was eight days old. She journaled that one of the first words in my vocabulary was “Bible.” I would not tell her because I already knew what her response would be. Stricken, twisting her hands in worry, fretting over what kind of sinner I would become if I turned from the church and

its principles. The only words she offered me in comfort, over and over: *Have you prayed about it?* Any time I told her I was stressed, struggling, afraid—*Have you prayed about it?* It felt like a hollow comfort, a distant pat on the back and a commission to deal with it on my own. She and I orbited each other, spinning on our paths without touching. I did not want to add to the reasons why she lay awake at night by becoming a prodigal daughter. So I would continue to do it on my own and say *I'm fine*. I'm fine. I'm fine. And she would believe it.

Did they interpret my silence for pondering how right they were to believe this way? To my grandfather, was I the faithful daughter of a faithful daughter? Did he ever realize that my silence was that of a daughter fracturing under the weight of a legacy fracturing our world? I was beginning to push a tentative hand through the cracks in my shell. I didn't want to be like them, but goodness knows I love them. Despite their flaws and mine. Perhaps they would begin to see something through the cracks in me, something I was looking for. Something better than this legacy. It's the getting there that hurts. Perhaps that is what it means to be faithful.

This Holy Land

“Look down from heaven, Your holy dwelling place, and bless Your people Israel and the land You have given us as You promised on oath to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

—Deuteronomy 26:15 (NIV)

In the third grade, gentle Mrs. Lawson stood in the front of class and directed us in singing Bible verses. She sang a line and we sang it back to her, and by the end of the day we could sing our way through all of 1 Corinthians 13. Mrs. Lawson papered the wall with memory verses printed out and stapled to colored construction paper, and they looked like a stained glass window behind her desk in the corner of the room.

“This one,” she told us, unsticking a verse on purple construction paper to hold up, “is one of my very favorites.” She led us in singing the verse, 2 Timothy 4:12: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.”² At the end of the verse she had added an upward, *bum bum bum* which led us back to the beginning so we could sing it over again. We sang it once, and then again, and then again.

Mrs. Lawson reminded us that we were never too young to share the gospel and taught us from books about missionaries. I pictured Gladys Aylward as a brave woman surrounded by adoring orphans, bending to unbind the feet of a young Chinese girl. Jim Elliot was fearless, looking down at the jungles of Ecuador from the window of a yellow plane, ready to peacefully take a spear to his body so that the gospel may reach the people within. It was Mrs. Lawson who first asked us if we would be brave like these missionaries, if we would be prepared to go to the

² NIV.

dark places God called us and, if necessary, die for the gospel too. In my mind I prayed, *Jesus, I love you. But please, please, please don't ask me to be a missionary.*

Senior year of high school, Mrs. Wills told us how the Columbine shooters had held a gun to the head of a high school girl and asked if she were a Christian. She said yes, and was killed. Of course, Mrs. Wills explained to us, we can't know that this is a reliable account because no one was in their right mind that day. The girl's own brother ran by her body to escape the building, completely unaware it was her. "But think about it," Mrs. Wills said, making a finger gun and holding it up. "If the same thing happened to you, what would you say?"

"What if..." someone asked. "What if we said 'no,' but in our head we really meant 'yes'?"

Mrs. Wills paused, her eyes turning to the ceiling as she considered. "No," she said slowly. "I don't think that would be right. Because, in that case, you're still verbally denying your faith."

I wasn't sure what I would do or say. I imagined a shooter pushing through the classroom door at that very moment to grab me by my hair and press the muzzle of a gun into my temple. I wasn't sure I would say "Yes, I am a Christian." The idea of a student my age being killed for her faith at school made it seem like I was looking martyrdom right in the face. I had always thought of martyrs as the Christians who were fed to lions in ancient times or killed by hostile soldiers overseas. People didn't get martyred in private Christian school or the white, middle-class suburbs we went home to in the evenings. But if they did, would I be brave enough to die with them? Would I die for this faith? I shamed myself for my doubts—because I doubted I would say "yes."

Yet I pledged to this faith each morning:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic...”

“I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Savior for which it stands...”

“I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s holy word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path...”

The words I intoned each day during thirteen years of Christian school were habitual. My mind wandered elsewhere as the words rolled from my mouth and I shifted my weight from foot to foot, waiting to sit down at my desk again. I never thought much of the order we pledged in, or in the way the order drove my life. First to the United States of America. To the realization of the American dream, to liberty and prosperity and capitalism. Second to Christianity. To the religion that stepped onto the soil of this land and with a burning desire for freedom and set afire whatever stood in its way. Third to the Bible. To the Word of God. First, we were Americans. Second, we were Christians. Third, we were guided by God.

Holy is sanctified, set apart, and dedicated to God. “Set apart” was the easiest part of that definition to cling to, and we did. Holiness was a mix of American and Christian ideals, so neatly intertwined they became indistinguishable. There could not be one without the other. We were blessed. We were called. We were a people chosen by God to crusade and convert from the suburbs, to take what we had been blessed with and share it with the world. We were producing a product within the walls of the church, a salvation we would sell. We would help them turn from sin and look like us.

What a glorious burden it was. When the pledges ended, we sat at our desks and read the morning announcements on our school-sanctioned iPads. Sometimes there would be a message from the director of missions to parents, advertising the year’s short-term mission trips as a way to introduce an entitled child to real world suffering.

I wished the superficiality came as a surprise to me, but it felt like a familiar part of Christian faith. The church of my childhood was caught in a great debate for many years over which style of worship it would embrace. Half the congregants wanted the services to remain traditional and the other half wanted contemporary worship. In the end compromise won, and it was decided two services would take place simultaneously on opposite ends of the church. One was a traditional service with a choir in robes and a roaring organ and a man who stood in the front and sang loudly from a hymnal. On the other side of the church was a contemporary service led by a worship leader with tattoos and black hair that flowed down his back. That service had strobe lights, a fog machine, and electric guitars that vibrated the doors to its sanctuary.

In my mind, the greatest problem facing the church was who liked their communion crackers served with a side of hymns and who liked it with Chris Tomlin's latest hit. On Sunday mornings I would hold my mother and father's hands and make them swing me between them on the way into church, passing the new children's wing that began construction when I was just entering the children's ministry and was left untouched—halfway finished—when I graduated to student ministry. The money had run out somewhere along the way as attendance continued to dwindle. In an effort to keep congregants happily filling seats every Sunday, the church decided they would need to make a bigger change. They decided the 9am service would be traditional, and the 11am service would be contemporary. Church would be something for everybody, so long as everybody who came was willing to show their gratitude by giving back.

I joined the mission to evangelize beyond our walls, but never went far from comfort. I used to take casseroles to a woman named Brittany who lived in a halfway house. She sprinkled pepper flakes on her pizza and could thread eyebrows because she'd learned how to in prison. She was missing a few of her top teeth because they'd been pistol-whipped out of her mouth

after a home invasion gone bad, after which she had been beaten and dropped in a ditch on the side of the road in Georgia to die. Brittany told me that while she was lying in the ditch, looking up and waiting to die, a sunrise came up over the trees and with it came the voice of God. He commanded her to *thrive. Thrive! Thrive! THRIVE!* It sounded as though someone were standing over her yelling it into her ear. The voice didn't stop until she dragged herself to her knees, then to her feet, and stumbled to a nearby house for help.

On the day she was baptized, Brittany had worn a dress and gone to lunch at a nice restaurant after church. "I looked like my momma had dressed me for church! You'd never know where I'd been," she crowed. I smiled and touched her arm, happy to see her happy and rescued and pleased to look like a Sunday Christian. I wondered what it would be like to hear the voice of God like she did. Maybe God was closer to a ditch in Georgia than He was to me in a sometimes traditional, sometimes contemporary sanctuary.

Church felt much the same as when I used to ride my bike around cul-de-sacs at the ends of my neighborhood streets. Going round and round and round. Nowhere and nowhere and nowhere. I held out my hands and they came back empty. So I had a little more faith and I read my Bible and prayed a little more. I went to Sunday school and church camp and Christian school. I volunteered weekly. When I made money I tithed ten percent to the church. It was my duty to give, and if I gave, God would give to me—maybe not physical wealth, but I was promised heavenly riches. I still wasn't sure about willingly sacrificing myself to martyrdom, so instead of going on mission trips myself I donated to others' trips and liked social media pictures of my friends wearing maxi skirts and cradling half-naked brown babies.

I made excuses for what I knew about this faith. The money I gave to short-term mission trips went to pay for the flights of my friends and not to help the people they were trying to

reach...but look at how joyful everyone looks in the pictures. And perhaps they are doing some good. I had friends who were gay, who believed their sexuality and faith were mutually exclusive, and I clumsily loved them, not knowing what to tell them beyond what my churches had told me about hating the sin and loving the sinner. I had friends who suffered from severe mental illness, who wondered why faith wouldn't heal them. I didn't know how to help them beyond offering prayer.

If pain is the signal the body sends to the brain to let it know something is wrong, I saw this cultural Christianity hurting the vulnerable and began to wonder if this was a sign it was not entirely biblical. Sometimes I was too tired to bow my head and close my eyes to pray, so I just stared straight ahead and waited to feel some inner tug that would tell me to *THRIVE* and give me a sliver of hope that it wasn't for nothing.

And I felt nothing.

We were chosen people. White and wealthy and blessed. We were chosen to crusade and convert and take the gospel to the poor and dirty barefoot orphans. This Christianity was rare and valuable. This was America, the land of religious freedom. But if this was our promised holy land, why did I still feel lost? *Would I die for this faith?*

I knew I would not.

Crossing

(n.) The intersection of the nave and transept in a cruciform church.

(n.) A place where one thing crosses another.

Holy Water

*“Well, my thoughts they grew legs / And ran with the wind / Not seeing what they were chasing/
But feeling it on their skin / Am I something to repair? / Can you find for me some ground? / If
they call the waters ‘holy’ / Does it mean that you can't drown? / Oh how I've tried, I've tried,
I've tried to find you.”*

—Tow'rs, *Holy Water*

My small arms churned through liquid silk as I swam. The water tugged my hair with gentle fingers, tangling it into a floating mass of halo around my head. I pulled my head beneath the surface as though a pastor were doing the dunking, letting the water and what I hoped was the Holy Spirit wash over me. *I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost...* Then I climbed out of the water and hoped it worked as the holiness ran down my legs and puddled around my toes, and I wondered if I was different yet. If I was clean.

Swimming in the neighbor's pool had become a ritual of self-baptism, which perhaps began in summer, at Vacation Bible School. My counselor for the day was my best friend's sister Vanessa, who had white-blond hair and was a teenager. She asked who among the group had been baptized, and when I raised my hand that I hadn't yet, pulled me aside to ask why I hadn't yet been baptized. What was I waiting for? Why didn't I want Jesus in my heart? Vanessa grew increasingly concerned as she pressed me with questions I didn't know how to answer. I hadn't really thought about it.

I hadn't realized baptism was so urgent. I believed that Jesus was my savior, but it seemed that once we were saved we needed to be hurried to the baptismal to make it official and really open up our hearts to Jesus. The public declaration and submersion was the final piece to becoming an official Christian. Without it, my salvation seemed questionable and unsure.

I asked to get baptized in the fourth grade, at church camp where lots of kids stood in the turquoise camp pool with their counselor and made a profession of faith to get saved. I was becoming increasingly afraid that I needed to be baptized, or else I wasn't really a Christian. Announcing I wanted to live for Jesus and get dunked in a body of water seemed an easy enough way to seal the deal, so when the youth pastor, Mr. B., had asked if anyone thought they'd like to be baptized at camp my hand went up, and I was ushered to a meeting with him and several other kids. We all sat on the camp's big deck that gave out generous helpings of splinters every summer, and Mr. B. leaned over to look each one of us in the eye and asked why we wanted to be baptized.

I'm sure I gave a textbook answer. I'd gone to church for so long I knew what I was supposed to say so they would let me get baptized in the pool at the end of the week. I looked Mr. B. in the eye as I spoke while my stomach tightened with the nervous thought that he wouldn't believe me, and I told him that I believed in Jesus and wanted Him to live in my heart. Later that day Mr. B. called everyone's parents to tell them their kid wanted to be baptized, and pulled me aside in the evening to tell me my parents had said I couldn't be baptized in the camp pool at the end of the week. I had to wait until I got back home to home where they would sign me up for a Sunday school class on baptism and schedule my baptism for a Sunday morning at church.

I did not want to be baptized in front of all those people on a Sunday morning. I was shy and uncomfortable in front of people—I still refused to ride merry-go-rounds because I was embarrassed to be on display in front of onlookers—and the sanctuary baptismal jutted out from the wall so it seemed to be hovering above the congregation. I would have to wear a white gown and stand in water my friends had reported was weirdly warm, and project my little voice to the

choir standing below and two floors of full seats telling them that I believed. At least at camp people were so busy jostling to pack up and say goodbye to summer friends no one would actually be watching me.

At the end of the week I went home and attended several weeks of a Sunday school class on baptism, where they passed out workbooks showing happy cartoon disciples and a smiling Jesus wearing a white tunic and purple sash. I learned the ABC's of salvation: Accept, Believe, Confess. But once the class was over we never scheduled a baptism in the hovering, lukewarm pool. I believed I needed to wait on someone else to tell me I was ready. Surely my parents hadn't forgotten this most important thing, had they? Now instead of wondering if I was an official Christian, I began wondering if I was saved at all. Eternal flames cast shadows in the back of my mind, fanned by my wondering what I lacked and what was left to understand about God before I would be deemed ready to receive the rite of passage so I could cross into what I believed was real, true Christianity.

In the meantime, I tried to invite that holiness on myself. Whenever I went swimming—whether in pools, ponds, rivers, or oceans—I self-baptized by dunking my head under the water and thinking the words over myself. I promised Jesus that I believed in Him and asked Him to save me as I floated beneath the surface. The Sunday school class hadn't told me what I was waiting for, or how I would *know* that Jesus had accepted the invitation. I emerged not feeling any more saved, wondering, *Is this it?*

By middle school I still wasn't baptized, which simultaneously made me feel like an imposter-Christian, and as though my window had passed, and I didn't need to bother with it anymore. Jesus and I had a verbal contract. I'd do my best, and He'd keep me out of hell. By now my family had moved to a new city and I was attending a cool church with a baptismal off

to the side of the stage. It was lit by neon lights and looked like a cool, retro hot tub. Instead of white gowns, the church outfitted new believers with graphic tees that read things like *Forgiven*, *Set Free*, and *New Creation*. I had reached an age where friends in my youth group were getting *re-baptized* as a sign of their renewed dedication to God before I had been baptized even once. When I looked at the baptism pool I tried to imagine myself in there, officially immersed, but all I could picture were the faces of my youth group friends wondering, *All this time she wasn't even baptized? But isn't that like, the bare minimum of committing to follow God?*

As much as I said it didn't matter, something heavy sat on my chest and got heavier. This wasn't *right*. Where was the promised peace? They told me expressing salvation and accepting, believing, and confessing made me clean, but I didn't feel it. I thought they were lying to me to make me feel better. Spoon feeding me encouragement, as though this crisis of faith might be soothed by kind words. I never felt salvation the way it was promised. I didn't necessarily need tongues of fire showered on my upturned face, like Pentecost, or an unmistakable dove descending to me and a booming voice from heaven. But If I were really a Christian who was really saved, wouldn't I feel *something*? I believed baptism was the piece I was missing.

Right before I went into high school, I told my parents I wanted to be baptized in late July, in the manmade pond behind the cool church. The sun turned the shallow water warm. My feet stirred the mud at the bottom of the pond, churning clouds of brown murk that followed my footsteps into a waist-deep spot. My father was the one who baptized me. Before he did he told those present—my mother, clutching her camera, and my two siblings, both bored and tugging at the grass—of how I had once ridden my bike around the neighborhood to deliver gospel tracts to the neighbors' mailboxes. Then he dunked me under and my body went horizontal; my feet left

the bottom of the pond and for a moment I was suspended. And that was probably as holy as I'll ever get: weightless in a muddy pond where I truly, for once, felt clean.

No tongues of fire, no doves, no booming voice from heaven. Just me, a girl who had finally grown tired enough to admit she was afraid and tired of doing it on her own. It was a sort of calm rightness, the final piece falling into place. The process wasn't nearly as complicated as it felt, and the holy waters weren't nearly as exclusive as they had once seemed. I didn't need to be a nativity-scene angel, dressed in white and hanging above a crowd of devoted believers. I didn't need a branded t-shirt or retro hot tub baptismal. I came out of the pond wiping gritty water from my skin—emerging to polite clapping from my siblings, a tearful sniff from my mother, and a “Congratulations!” called down the bank from a man fishing in the pond.

I wrapped myself in a striped pool towel and smiled at them, feeling free for finally having been baptized and pushing away the nagging doubt that I had walked into the water out of fear rather than love. This would be a new beginning, I chided myself. Now that I was baptized, I had my final piece. I had wanted to be fully committed and feel this holiness sure and solid within me. I was really, truly a Christian now. Wasn't I?

Sex Ed

“‘And so it is with many fair maidens,’ the king explained. ‘Their beauty is never fully seen, for they wait not until the proper time. They are handled and played with by too many a fellow. Their heart is opened prematurely. The fragrance and beauty that was intended for the perfect time is lost or damaged forever.’”³

—Sarah Mally, *Before You Meet Prince Charming*

We played a game in ninth grade Sex Ed called the “STD Game,” which wasn’t really a game at all because it seemed the only object was to show how many ways there were to lose. The girls in fifth period health class gathered around desks and rolled dice that symbolized premarital sex as a risky game in itself where we “rolled the dice” with potentially disastrous consequences. The number the die landed on determined which STD the girl got—unless she rolled a six, which meant she got pregnant. Or a one, which meant she was one of the lucky ones who managed to escape the repercussions of her actions. A look of disappointment always flashed across our teacher’s face for a moment when someone rolled a one. We half-heartedly tossed dice at our desks to determine who would have chlamydia and who would get herpes.

Our Sex Ed teacher was an upbeat, middle-aged mom who was also the girls’ volleyball coach. She began the class by telling us how much fun she had teaching Sex Ed each year and promised we would have fun too—after all, we would play games. Through tears of laughter she told us how, one year, a girl had rolled a six so many times in the STD Game they had started calling her “Fertile Myrtle.”

On another day of Sex Ed, the teacher passed around a box of Hershey’s Kisses and had each girl take one, unwrap and eat it, and put the foil wrapper back into the box. “Come on, don’t

³ Sarah Mally, *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity* (Marion, Iowa: Tomorrow’s Forefathers, 2006), 33.

be shy,” she instructed. “Take a whole handful if you want!” I took two and unwrapped one, popping it into my mouth before putting my trash back into the box and passing it forward.

Creamy milk chocolate warmed and melted on my tongue.

When the box made it back to the front of the classroom, she reached in and pulled out a handful of silver wrappers. She told us that our bodies were this way—if we gave what we had to offer to men before marriage, one man and then another, then another, we would have nothing but worthless wrappings to present to our husbands at the altar. Who would want a box of crumpled tin foil litter? Could you imagine approaching a godly man on your wedding day and offering him this box of trash? Could you?

We made journals in Sex Ed with the idea of one day gifting them to our daughters so they too would see the benefits of waiting on God’s promised match. Mine was a cheap, spiral bound notebook with delicate pages that I stapled my worksheets to. It looked like this:

Page One

MY VALUES. *Over my lifetime, I want to...*Go on a vacation with my best friends. Write letters for someone to find. Travel Europe.

Page Two

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” Hebrews 13:4.⁴

Page Three

MR. PERFECT LIST. A reminder that I would not settle for less than the 86 points of what I one day hoped to find in a husband.

Page Four

⁴ NIV.

A BOYFRIEND/POTENTIAL HUSBAND EVALUATION CARD that listed the fruits of the spirit and a box to check “yes” or “no” next to it. At the bottom it said in capital letters: IF HE IS MISSING TWO OR MORE, HE MAY NOT BE THE RIGHT GUY, RIGHT NOW.

Page Seven

Two pieces of paper that I was instructed to glue together and tear apart when the glue dried. The ragged pieces would act as a reminder that once bound to a man by sex it was messy and difficult to separate, and complete separation was impossible. We would forever carry pieces of that person with us. I taped the paper to the page that way: thin and torn. Beneath it I wrote Genesis 2:24.⁵

Page Eight

The “SAFE” acronym for how we should respond to sexually tempting situations: *Set boundaries, Avoid danger, Firmly say no, Exit/get out.* Beneath it I wrote 2 Timothy 2:22.⁶

Page Ten

A purity contract with a space for me to fill in my name.

I, Lauren Ash, commit on this day to honor the Lord by not participating in any sexual activity before I have pledged my love in marriage. (Hebrews 13:4). I will pray and trust that God will bring the right man to me in His time according to His plan. (Psalms 37:4-7) (Jeremiah 29:11). I will not put myself in compromising or tempting situations. (Song of Solomon 8:4). I will be committed to treating the

⁵ “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” NIV.

⁶ “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” NIV.

opposite sex as a brother in Christ by guarding their purity. (Ephesians 5:1-3). I will guard my heart and save my deepest emotions, thoughts, and feelings until marriage. (Proverbs 4:23). I am committed to praying for my guidance in decision making with the opposite sex. (Colossians 4:2).

I placed my signature at the bottom of the page, dated it, and had my friend sign the line beneath my signature as my accountability partner.

The sexual education of a young Evangelical Christian girl went like this. My mother gave me “The Talk” shyly, without explaining the process of sex. Instead she told me of the way men could be excited by the way a woman looked. How I didn’t want to be responsible for arousing men. She did not tell me of the female body beyond how I must dress it modestly to take care with the eyes of men. I was hardly a temptress at age fifteen. Awkward and bookish, I had fluffy, curly hair and persistent pimples. I weighed under 90 pounds, had just graduated from an AA cup bra to an A, and was too skinny to find a school uniform that fit properly. As a young teenager already uncomfortable and self-conscious in her body, especially around boys, being warned this body was capable of tempting men into sin was a horrifying thought.

On my sixteenth birthday I was gifted a purity ring and a book called *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity*, in which a princess is taught that opening a pure white rosebud before it has bloomed is careless and irreversible. A girl’s sexuality was again compared to food: “How will your future husband feel,” the author wrote, “if you have already given pieces of your heart to others and can only offer him a partly-eaten cake? He wants a cake baked just for him, not one with pieces missing that others have tasted first.”⁷

⁷ Mally, *Before You Meet Prince Charming*.

I was introduced to “The Line,” a vague measurement that was not to be crossed, but was preceded by a slippery slope of other sins that were essentially the same offense as crossing “The Line.” Lustful thoughts were sinful because that man was likely someone else’s future husband, making them adulterous, and lustful thinking could lead to other sins. Porn was simply filthy. Masturbation was sinful because it was teaching the body to respond to oneself rather than saving sexual pleasure for marriage, which would lead to a less fulfilling sex life later. Oral sex crossed “The Line” because it’s still sex, and even kissing could get out of hand and lead a girl down the slippery slope.

“Before my girls leave for a date,” our Sex Ed teacher told the class, “I do this—” She held her hand flat and drew it across her neck in a gesture indicating the act of slitting someone’s throat. “—to remind them they shouldn’t touch below the neck.”

From the stage at Wednesday night youth group the student ministry pastor paced back and forth, gesticulating wildly as he stumbled over the word “orgasm.” He used the line *Are you the person the person you’re looking for is looking for?* to remind us that a godly husband wouldn’t be looking for a spent wife. To curb lust, he suggested imagining Jesus Himself was in the room with us. After all, the love of another person would never satisfy the way the love of God would. After the sermon he spoke to those who had already made mistakes and held out the invitation to become a born-again virgin, telling them it was not too late to commit to abstinence until marriage. He read from John 8, where an adulterous woman is brought to Jesus’ feet and He tells her that she is not condemned, but she should go and sin no more. The pastor raised his voice over the crowd of teens, telling us that the same invitation was being held out today. *Go and sin no more.*

What was purity if not the most valuable gift I had to offer as a woman in the church? My value as an obedient Christian and godly woman was dependent on my sexuality. Premarital sex would make me a less valuable wife and unworthy of love from a godly man. My own body became a mystery to me as I was taught to repress thoughts and feelings that were deemed unnatural. If an inappropriate thought slipped out, I internalized the guilt, believing myself weak and sinful for not being able to overcome temptation.

Once, a girl I'd met in passing pulled me aside at a student leadership retreat so she could tell me her testimony. With downcast eyes, she admitted what she called the gross and shameful part of her story. She had let a boy finger her. But she didn't invite his hands on her, not like that. And she felt like the dirty one; she had allowed herself to be defiled.

A friend told me that she endured her boyfriend's battle with addiction and cancer without her parents knowing she was dating anyone. Her virginity, she said, was more important to them than her being their child in need of support.

"My dad," she told me, "called me while I was driving to a male friend's house and told me I was a desperate whore for going over to a boy's house." She threw her hands up. "If I can't go to a friend's house without them thinking I'm having sex, how could I tell them anything about my life?"

After a night of worship at church, I sat in my car in a dorm parking lot as a friend cried in my passenger seat. I pulled a tissue from the console between our seats and held it out to her.

"We had sex," she told me, her eyes sliding past me to the light across the street as tears continued making their way down her cheeks.

"But I don't feel guilty about it," she whispered. "Why don't I feel bad?"

As though she wanted to feel the promised guilt as punishment for her sins, and perhaps, by enduring it, she might be absolved.

I have curved my shoulders forward to make my chest less visible. Pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes in an effort to shake myself free of thoughts I shouldn't be thinking. I have crossed my legs and checked the length of my skirts and averted my eyes from men's. If my body language could speak for itself, it would beg to be seen as a person and not a body.

Someone told me about a conference where the speaker passed around a rose to the front rows of the audience, telling them to handle it, touch it, take its petals. She held it up to the room after the rose was passed and asked *who would want this ruined rose?* It reminded me of a box of Hershey's Kisses passing through the hands of a class of fifteen-year-old girls who were learning their bodies were food for men.

But at this conference, someone stood up from the audience and said, "Jesus would. Jesus would want that rose."

He would, wouldn't He? I'd been told He was in the business of loving us in our messes. Years after I stapled worksheets into my Sex Ed journal, I found it in a pile of notebooks and took a stack of sticky notes to it, working page by page to paste a new view over each worksheet. A beginning to rewriting years of a sexual narrative. Satisfied, I replaced the notebook in its pile, only to come back a few days later and riffle through the pages and remove the sticky notes, unsticking them one by one from the pages and crumpling them into a ball. I had realized I was afraid my mother might come in and go through the pile, recognize the notebook and be curious, and open it to remember the things I had learned in Sex Ed only to find I was unlearning these things. As far as she or anyone else would know, I had no moment of crossing from one way of

thinking to another. Years of a sexual narrative unwritten only to be rewritten out of fear that though Jesus would want the rose, the Christians I knew would not.

The Body Temple

“If the body is a temple, then tattoos are its stained glass windows.”

—Sylvia Plath

Molly showed me sketches and pictures of the first tattoo she wanted. She saw the symbol at an Underoath concert in high school, and it had resonated with her so deeply she planned to have it inked over the scars on her forearms. In the first picture she took of it, the billowing stage smoke and flickering green lights are caught in a still moment. In the center is a circular mandala composed of straight lines, presiding above the crowd like a stained glass window above a congregation. A mandala folding outwards, expanding, growing, breaking through its own skin.

Molly has round, sad green eyes and thin eyebrows with high arches that make her look even more sad. But she is really only mostly sad, most of the time.

I believe I first learned 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 as a lesson in hygiene and self care. Like the cartoons that explain to kids why it’s important to brush their teeth or eat vegetables. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”⁸ From there, the verse was applied to any other lessons that included a portion on health and the body, namely in discussions about not defiling the body with premarital sex or getting drunk.

From that verse, I saw the states of the body and soul were intimately connected. An issue with one suggested an issue with the other, which is reminiscent of ancient lessons where religious leaders told people their physical maladies were a consequence of their own sins or the

⁸ NIV.

sins of their parents.⁹ Therefore, an ailment in the body pointed to an ailment in the soul, and by fixing the soul the body might also be fixed.

In the Evangelical tradition we had since rejected the idea that physical illness is a mark of sin, but that good grace had not yet extended to illness of the mind. I thought of the body as a home I needed to make a suitable living space for Jesus so He could move into my heart. The watchful eyes of my spiritual authorities acted as the homeowner's association that would help ensure everything was up to the expected level of quality. Not taking care of myself or thinking lowly of my body was akin to spitting on the special gift God had given me. Though I could not control the comings and goings of sickness or injury, I was responsible for my thoughts, which translated to the way I viewed and cared for my body temple.

Were the scars offensive to God? Molly wanted to leave her own body so badly she tried to cut her soul out of her skin. I didn't know what tool she used to make those clean, straight lines across her forearms. I didn't know what she used to burn her hands, the angry purple splotches spreading across the backs of them. She burned an illegible word onto the soft skin of her wrist, above her pulse. Her mother told her she did these things for attention.

Her parents sent her to Christian school where it was suggested trusting in God would be enough to heal her mental illness.¹⁰ The day I met Molly, I wondered why she kept her uniform sweater on when the temperatures climbed into the high 80s, until a sleeve slipped down her wrist as she pushed her hair away from her face and revealed fresh cuts. She said the one place she didn't feel alone was outpatient care, where she'd gone after her parents realized her suicidal thoughts weren't being prayed away.

⁹ John 9, NIV.

¹⁰ Matthew 9:21, Matthew 8:13, Mark 10:51, NIV.

After high school, Molly blew mango-flavored vape smoke through the cracked window of her car and told me she hated Christians. She hated their ignorance and stupidity, the way they weaponized religion to push their own agendas, the way they claimed to love but never extended it to those who hurt the most. I told her I couldn't blame her. I often felt the same way. I had grown weary of making excuses for Christians and defending the parts of our faith tradition I did not like or understand. I was tired of thinking the way they did. I could not think the way they did, not when I cared for the girl who blew smoke through cracked windows.

That night we went to a restaurant where we drank kombucha that tasted like vinegar and spoiled berries. Over the ramen menu Molly said she was going to kill herself. Not right away. Someday, when the depression and anxiety became unbearable. She felt certain they would. My brain sparked and blew out for a moment in fear until minimal suicide prevention training kicked in and questions began spurting through my mind—*Do you have a plan? Do you have the tools to execute that plan?* But she sat and shook her head, and something suggested that wasn't what she needed, not then.

So we sat and looked into each other's sad eyes and cried. Through tears I told her there was a reason she was there, and I was there, and we were there together. And though I knew she wouldn't believe it, I told her God loved her even more than I did, and that He had a plan for her life. My words felt dry and useless on my tongue against years of blame at the hands of Christians, but I wanted her to know—she had to know in some small way—that never once was she offensive to God. Never once had she been anything but beloved. She was a soul as well as a body, and both deserved care.

When the birds came back and the trees began to blossom, Molly and I went to a thrift store where I bought a book and she bought a sweatshirt. We drank tea at a coffee shop and only

left because it closed for the night. We walked back to her car in the dark, dodging puddles we could barely see glistening on the sidewalk by the glow of the streetlights, holding our books and umbrellas to our chests. Molly threw her arm over my shoulders and told me that hanging out with me always made her soul feel cleansed. I shuffled my armload so I could wrap my arm around her shoulders too.

When we got back to her car I dug a pen out of my bag and told her to inscribe something in the front of my book to commemorate the night. She wrote: “Spring Break 2019! My soul is literally cleansed.”

“I think I spelled ‘literally’ wrong,” she said.

“I don’t care,” I told her, taking the book back and running my fingers over the cover the whole drive home.

The stained glass was the traffic light reflected on the windshield, my pew a coffee-stained cloth seat that smelled slightly of mango smoke. The image of Christ was not hung from the rearview mirror, but stamped on the souls of the congregation growing, expanding, and existing beyond our own skin. *Maybe, I thought, maybe this is what it means to be a body temple.*

Pathway

(n.) A route or way of access to; way of reaching or achieving something.

(n.) Biochemistry. A series of reactions by which one organic substance is converted to another.

Unravelling

“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”

—1 Kings 19:11-13 (NIV)

If my faith were a thread it would be one that has spent its life unraveling, and one that I have constantly worked to knot, braid, and tie back together. It’s a wishy-washy kind of faith that oscillates between believing and not believing, between devotion and frustration. The thread had frayed to the point of snapping when I found myself half-bent forward in a chair made for a child, in the back room of a concert venue that served as a church building on Sundays, waiting to be prayed over by two women I had never met. At this church they served communion off the bar and I had to squint at my Bible because the soft glow of the overhead bulbs was too weak to light the pages. The back of the venue had a few rooms reserved for children’s Sunday school, where shadows grew along the walls this late in the evening. The latest service of the day was about to let out. I could make out the words of their worship songs through the thin walls.

Sitting awkwardly in the child-sized seat, I told God I wasn’t sure He was real. I never would have told even one person this secret confession. Such a taboo and sinful thought, that. Admitting to struggling on my spiritual path was almost always met with pitying looks: mouth set in a serious line, eyebrows drawn upward and together in concern, focused eyes intent on meeting mine. *I’m so sorry you feel that way. Have you prayed about it? Have you read your Bible? Are you doing daily quiet time? Here’s a book you should read. Try this devotional. What*

would happen if I said I wasn't just struggling, but was holding on to an ever-weakening thread of faith with one foot out the door of the church?

I didn't want or need another quiet time, another devotional, another Bible verse written out and taped up on my mirror for daily meditation. I had those things. They weren't working. Sometimes I'd look into the pitying face and wonder, *Do you believe what you're telling me? Or is this what you've been conditioned to say? Are you the same as me? Are we all? Do any of us believe this?*

On this night I sat in the familiar prayer stance that had become reflex after many years in many churches. When prompted by *Let's pray*, or *Will you pray with me?* my head dropped down in response. My eyes drifted shut and my fingers interlaced as though pulled by an invisible force. I'd signed up online for a prayer session that the church pastor had promised would be a direct line to God, which sounded to me like we might be performing a seance. The idea of something so seemingly charismatic had made me shy away, as though in the middle of the session I might also be handed a venomous snake to hold as a test of my faith. A test I would—I was sure—not pass.

Mostly, I was nervous I would hear nothing. Radio silence from the heavens that would prove what I secretly suspected all along: God was not real and I had spent my childhood and early adulthood following a religion of smoke and mirrors. I had paced in circles around my bedroom before signing up for the session, going back and forth with myself and asking what I had to lose. What if prayer was just a posture and words spoken into empty air? What if it wasn't? My curiosity won. Either I would find God, or shed a dying faith once and for all.

So I went to the church on a Sunday night and the only place we could find to pray was a back room in the children's ministry space. One of the women was named Jen, my mother's

name. Jen said, “Let’s talk to God.” And this time I did not feel pulled into a prayer stance so much as I simply fell into it, exhausted. My heart was tired. Tired of church. Tired of following rules. Tired of disappointment.

How do I measure back to where it first began? Where the nagging misgiving behind eyes closed in prayer grew a small doubt in the soil of the soul for the first time. Somewhere down the line, Christianity became more of a comfort than a call to action. A comfort that I bought into, sought after, loved, and lost. One that I finally wished to reject in hopes of finding something true, even if that true thing wasn’t God. I didn’t know a life without God—could not imagine my life without daily prayers and Bible readings, without Sunday church and Bible studies. God had been a constant idea, something in the back of my mind and surrounding me in the form of Christian friends and family at all times. When I signed up for the prayer session I told God, “I’m not going to keep chasing this if it isn’t real. Either You show up at this thing, or I’m not going to follow You anymore.”

I had prepped before the prayer session, asking myself questions like, *If this doesn’t work out and I found out God isn’t real, will I still go to church on Sundays?* and, *If God isn’t real, should I continue pretending to be a Christian in front of my family to spare them the pain of knowing I’ve rejected their faith? Where do I even start with leaving my religion?*

Jen had her Bible open across her lap, her fingers whispering a soft *shhhhh* against the pages as my thread came undone. Perhaps I was so hungry I ate the words without tasting them. Perhaps I would have accepted anything I felt as a sign or divine nudge. Perhaps my mind had conjured images and words that I wanted, in my desperation, to hear. But I had tried to do that very thing years before at a massive student retreat, where a thousand teenagers were given white paper bags and battery-operated tea lights and told we would wait for Jesus to tell us something.

When He did, we would write the words down on the bag, put the candle inside, and set it on the stage with all the other words. My bag sat on the floor of the auditorium, untouched, as I waited for words that never came. I was too afraid to put my words in God's mouth.

As Jen prompted my prayers, things I had not thought about in years began running through my mind as though set on a video reel. The memory of the white paper bag surfaced, and the youth worship leader with his long black hair and beard, and my high school Bible classrooms—all of the places I learned to not expect to hear the voice of God. If I had spoken anything over myself it would have been shame and anger, not words of comfort. What was I doing here, looking for answers? Did I have such little faith?

Around an hour into the session, we'd finished the preliminary praying and were entering the real, good subconscious work that felt like a cross between psychoanalysis and vivisection.

"Ask God what it means for Him to be your shepherd," Jen instructed. So I closed my eyes and did, and in my mind I pictured Jesus with His back to me, surrounded by sheep and walking away with staff in hand. I pushed my legs forward to keep up. My chest constricted with the effort, and I reached out a hand to catch His cloak with my fingertips before He stepped out of my reach again.

"Stop," Jen said. "Ask when you learned that barely grasping the back of Jesus' cloak was the closest you would ever get to Him?"

The video reel began again, taking me back through churches, pews, and plastic seats. Through church camp and youth retreats and all the messages I'd learned and tried to believe. Through all the working and striving and trying to keep up with a God who I thought didn't have the desire to coax a straggling believer along with the flock. And all that time, all I'd known was the back of His cloak.

“Now, ask for a true picture of what it looks like to be shepherded by Jesus,” Jen prompted. The image disappeared and the constriction in my chest relaxed. I was sitting next to the shepherd now. At rest. At peace.

In the back of my mind, a whispered thought: *I didn't shed my blood to keep you at arm's length.*

“Take everything you learned growing up, and *release it*,” Jen said.

“Um, I release it?” I said. To God, or myself, I didn't know. Maybe both of us, plus Jen and the other woman dutifully taking down notes on the prayers for me and witnessing me blow my nose into the same tissue I'd been recycling for two hours while I cried. I wondered if this was what it meant to be born again. To let the faith thread unravel. To start over.

That Sunday night, the door swung open and I stepped into the chilled November air. It soothed my eyes, hot from crying. I caught a glimpse of something that looked real and true.

In that moment, I named it hope.

Walk Back the Cat

The least strained and most natural ways of the soul are the most beautiful; the best occupations are the least forced.

—*Michel de Montaigne*

I learned to exorcise demons in Bible class my sophomore year of high school. That made my education sound cool, and it made me sound like some demon-slaying powerhouse, but that was not the case. My teacher (Mr. Reynolds) strongly resembled a gentle, wizened turtle with twinkly eyes. He had a rounded back and a longish neck that made his head stick forward and out. His voice was deep and slow, and he said, “Well, bless your heart,” nearly every time a student spoke to him with such sincerity it made me believe he did feel surprised and blessed that we would speak to him.

During the week Mr. Reynolds taught sophomore Bible classes at our Christian school, and on Sundays he pastored a church. Most of our Bible teachers were also pastors, supplementing income, I supposed, by one job or the other. There was Mr. Gifford, who once explained circumcision in greater detail than any of us wanted, and Mr. Jamison, who was best known for nasally shouting “Aquinas!” in a fit of passion any time the lesson called for a mention of Thomas Aquinas. But turtle-ish Mr. Reynolds was, to me, the gatekeeper to the most exciting curriculum. Previous Bible classes had been spent taking memory verse quizzes on a weekly basis, tracing the Jewish Diaspora, and memorizing the books of the Bible. Although we would do those same things in Mr. Reynolds’s class, we were promised lessons on demon-possession and other ancient spiritual concepts that no other teacher had dared approach.

Though I believed demons were real, I had never encountered one in real life, and the people I knew who claimed to have seen angels and demons usually only came upon them in huts in impoverished villages while on short-term mission trips, where it was likely they were

seeing through a haze of culture shock and heat exhaustion. I was horribly jealous of them anyway, because the God I encountered was one of Sundays and memory verse quizzes and not one of driving out demons and miraculous healing. Demons didn't get exorcised in the middle class suburbs of Kentucky. But Mr. Reynolds hadn't just *encountered* demons, he'd cast them out of bodies right here in Kentucky and would teach us to do the same. I was thrilled.

We spent two class periods on demons. We practiced authoritatively saying, "In the name of Jesus...!" and then commanding the evil spirit to come out of the person, or thing. We watched a documentary on the occult which included shaky footage of people at a revival in Africa, worshipping in a field when a girl suddenly fell to the ground and began to convulse. Her eyes rolled back in her head and her body contorted itself, speaking to those gathered in a distorted voice as bodies crowded around, reaching out to grab her arms and hold her still so someone could command the demon to come out. Mr. Reynolds stood in the front of class and told us how he had exorcised a demon from a possessed cat. He told us we could encounter demons anywhere, at any time. Once, he had walked by two girls at the beach only to be struck by a powerful wave of nausea as they passed. He had bent forward, putting his hands on his knees to quell the sudden, violent urge to be sick, and turned to watch them go. "I knew something was spiritually wrong," he said, "but when the two girls started making out, it was confirmed."

After Mr. Reynolds's class, I thought demons would be a bigger problem in my daily life. In the following years, I only used the lessons as clout in Christian circles. Being able to casually drop exorcism into conversation made me seem much more interesting and spiritual, though I would never be prepared to identify and expel a demon. I thought I may have encountered demon possession once, when a woman approached me at church to tell me she'd been struck

dead in her driveway, sent to hell, raised to life, and commissioned by God to travel the nation as a missionary to tell Christians they were in danger of losing their salvation. She kept intense eye contact and didn't blink throughout her breathless spiel. When she finished she stared at me, and I stared back, mouth slightly agape as I tried to process what one should say in that situation. Before I could say anything, though, she turned around in her seat to talk to someone else.

I wasn't sure what to make of the woman, but I considered she was either telling the truth, possessed in some way, or a genuine crackpot. All three seemed equally possible. People with funny ideas like that received headshakes and "bless their hearts" in my Evangelical tradition. There were two types of Christians who came to church on Sundays: the casual variety who baked lasagnas for those in need, and the kind who got sent out on mission and witnessed intense spiritual warfare. It seemed there were also two versions of God: the one who wanted us to be nice to everyone and give to the church financially, and the one who showed up to revivals in a blaze, ready to wreck hearts and blow minds. Who, perhaps, also struck people dead in their driveways as an introduction to their Kingdom commission.

Who was that God?

The same today, yesterday, and tomorrow. In Christian school we used words like *omniscient*, *omnipotent*, and *omnipresent*. All-knowing, all-powerful, all-present. Of course, there was no moment when God went from a holy, radical being to blessed lasagna. If He had not changed, then we must have. But when did we begin unmaking Him?

I've visited cathedrals with their stained glass windows casting colors across marble floors, reflecting Bible stories illuminated by the sun, illuminating the onlookers with understanding. Near the altar, a priest murmured the Lord's prayer in Latin. *Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum*...I mouthed the words along, one of the few lines I

remembered from a hundred Latin classes. *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...*

I pitied the people who filled the pews when they were first built and listened to Latin words they couldn't understand. The people who relied on the clergy to interpret the words of God and the stained glass windows to depict the Bible they couldn't read. But no matter the changes my religion has undergone over the years, no matter how many hands and mouths touched and interpreted God's words, was I not just like them? Sitting, waiting for someone else to interpret the Bible for me and tell me what is good and evil. I have clung to pastors' gift of the original Greek or Hebrew translation of a single word to explain what this and that concept *really* means. I have drunk watered-down Christianity and claimed it quenched my thirst for the divine.

And before all that, before Cathedrals broke ground there were totems erected in scattered villages, centers from which the sacred things separated from the profane. The totem became a crucifix, a church steeple, a Bible held aloft. Around, beneath, and beside came the people: congregations gathered to be made well, clean, and new. Have I not gathered with them, with palms outstretched to receive a promised spiritual touch?

Perhaps we began unmaking God when we began thinking ourselves the gatekeepers to that spiritual touch. Give...and receive the spiritual filling we crave. Live this way...and be blessed by that holiness. Do this...and be rewarded with the spiritual riches we crave.

To "walk back the cat" is to trace backwards, beginning with what is known in order to reconstruct and learn from the past. I've felt my soul move while singing and swaying in worship, floating underwater on a clear day, holding a broken friend, crying out over a letter from an anonymous writer wishing someone would see her. It's made me suspicious that the divine is not something I will encounter just a few times, looking up from the base of a totem,

begging for my soul to be cleaved in two. Perhaps instead it's something that stirs the soul with a thousand tiny miracles that turn my heart over just a little bit, a piece at a time. Perhaps demons don't appear so much in possessed cats as they do in the places where violence reigns, where evil is more present in a mind consumed by hate rather than a kiss between two women. I hold the tiny miracles to my chest and continue to ask for discernment between what has been added by people desperate for the divine and what is good and true. I sift through the mess of religion, spirit, and lasagnas to find God in the midst of it all.

All God's Creatures

*“All things bright and beautiful / All creatures great and small / All things wise and wonderful /
The Lord God made them all.”*

—James Herriot

My father's father had a slow decline into death. He shrunk away until there was little left but some skin and brittle bone for my grandmother to cradle in his hospital bed. She took to looking far away after he passed, lost in her own thoughts and grief. She wore his wedding band beneath her own and kept his fingerprint on a necklace around her neck, her hands finding them and touching them absentmindedly, her eyes seeing something we could not beyond us. After he passed away she told me there was a bird that flew into the food pantry where he had volunteered until just a few months before his death. The bird had flown up into the rafters and swooped down into the office—it hadn't left the volunteers alone all day.

“That's so Don,” she sighed, a tight smile pulling her lips upward. “Coming to visit them like that.”

I think it was easier to think of her husband that way, as some kind of present rather than all kinds of past. Sometimes my brain leaps back and forth from logic to faith and back again as though I must take one or the other. Sometimes I think we invent signs and wonders to make ourselves feel better and perhaps there is no truth in them. Karl Marx called religion the opium of the people. We conjure up signs and wonders in the same way we conjure fantastical stories of how the world came to be. From dust came man. From man came woman. From two people came sin. From sin came all that's wrong with the world and its people. It's easier to tell a story than admit we are totally and completely alone.

A classmate once pulled out a Bible, placed it in front of me, and flipped to Genesis 1. He pointed to the verses and asked me, “How could plants grow before God made the sun?” I didn't

know how. Because God is God, that's how. I must have answered with something like that. I had a difficult time pinning my wiggling faith down with science, which it seemed to elude at every turn. *If the earth is only a few thousand years old, why does carbon dating suggest it is billions of years old?* Because God is God, that's how. *Why would a good god allow so much suffering?* Because God is God, that's how.

Retreats would take me into the woods or to the tops of mountains to remind me of God's majesty and goodness. Tipping my head back to face the sky I could swear I felt His presence in the warm sunlight, in the cooling breeze, in the sounds of a complex and beautiful world coming alive. But the terrible things were there too. A deer limped by with a broken leg swinging from the joint, waiting to die or be killed. Baby birds lay plastered to the ground after a storm, their necks twisted at awkward angles. Little gray bodies with bulbous eyes, distended bellies, and gawky wing bones yet unfeathered. Everything seemed to cry out, *Where is God?*

I had a teacher in high school, Mr. Gardner, who had radical ideas about reconciling the Bible, which he called Book of God's Word, and nature, which he called the Book of God's Works. He sat at the edge on a desk in the front and pushed us forward, asking, *What then? What then?* until we finally managed to explain what we believed, or sat back, defeated. Once he had us all stand on different sides of the room and debate a verse we had quoted throughout our Christian education: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb."¹¹

He had the class split up the class and head to different sides of the room based on whether we believed the word "knit" should be understood literally or taken figuratively. I

¹¹ Psalm 139:13, NIV.

headed to my side. Literal, of course. The Bible was the pure Word of God. If God said “knit,” He meant “knit.” I stood with my arms folded and prepared to defend the Bible.

Mr. Gardner zeroed in on me and took his seat at the edge of a desk in the front, rubbing his hands together before leaning forward to speak. “Lauren, if we were to do an ultrasound on a fetus, would we see two hands in there with knitting needles, literally knitting the baby together?”

“Mr. Gardner, ‘knit’ doesn’t always mean to knit with needles and yarn,” I replied. “It can mean to join together too.”

We went back and forth on the topic for the rest of class, leaving me hot-faced and wishing I had just said the verse was a metaphor all along. But what Mr. Gardner explained about the verse, and the word, was that it didn’t need to be literal to carry truth. In the same way he had us study the creation story in Genesis 1, and the big bang theory, and evolution. He drew charts out on the whiteboard to show it wasn’t just the theory of evolution versus young earth creationism. There were other theories we could apply that reconcile what we saw in Scripture and what we learned from science. They were not so distant from each other after all, so long as we looked at everything logically and tested it against the evidence. Is it possible to know all, to have my fill of theories and debates and evidence? I think not. We are still looking for the bottom of the ocean—we’ve got a long way to go before we learn the secrets of the universe. In Mr. Gardner’s class, I sat at my desk and decided it all had to start somewhere. Who’s to say it couldn’t have started with God?

Sometimes stories were just stories. But sometimes, like parables, they carried truth. I’m not sure God sends departed souls back as birds, but I do think He sends comfort in ways that

seem especially special and just for us. I could reconcile that. I could reconcile pain and goodness. I've had both. Evil can only exist if there's good, the way rust can only exist on steel.

After a storm we found a perfect, speckled nuthatch egg that blew in from who knows where. I added the nuthatch egg to another grandmother's collection, my mother's mother, who keeps the discarded eggs snug in an old nest that fell from a tree. She took out a book of North American birds that we flipped through to match the eggs to the birds that laid them. She always guessed them right. Cardinal and chickadee and robin. We used a spatula to scoop grape jelly into the oriole feeder she set up in her yard. Her body stilled and relaxed as she watched her orange-bibbed orioles from the window. A woodpecker walked up the tree next to the feeder, its chest parallel to the trunk. "Isn't it amazing how God made them?" My grandmother asked me. She held up a hand and curled it into a talon. "Their feet are shaped perfectly to get them up the tree." I believe my grandmother saw God in those birds. Some still, small comfort, intended just for her. Perhaps even in solitude, there was community, and she was never totally and completely alone.

Another grandfather was dying quietly in a different room in the house as cancer made him shrink away. I have asked that dreaded question, the one I fear hardest to answer. *If God is good, why is the world not? Why do we suffer? Why is there so much pain?* I have been told that God would rather we shake our fist at Him than turn our back on Him. If we are wrestling with God, then at least we are in close proximity. So I fight, and I rage, and I shake my fist, and I wrap my arms around myself and cry. And it might hurt, but it is infinitely better than living with false peace clinging to the answer *Because God is God, that's how*. There is hope in knowing there is more to the story.

Homeward

(n.) Toward home.

Sin or No Sin

“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.”

—Anne Lamott

I have often pictured repentance as Bob Cratchit approaching Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve to ask if he can spend Christmas with his family. I take my hat off and shuffle up to the throne of God to grovel for forgiveness. I supposed repentance meant prostrating myself and being really, really sorry. I would admit what I did wrong and then bow down to take whatever punishment or forgiveness was in store.

When I was a little girl I would confess my sins every night as I fell asleep. Most of these sins were being mean to my younger sister, who I didn't like very much at the time because she was in a constant state of tears. All the same, I knew this must be what repentance meant: I would trace my day by the sins I had committed and by bringing them to the forefront of my mind and by being sorry, I would be forgiven. *Dear God, I'm sorry I called Lindsey a crybaby today. Dear God, I'm sorry I told Mom a lie today, even though it was a little one it was still a lie. Dear God, I'm sorry...* I fell asleep with confessions still flowing.

I met a guy in a Sunday school class who told me he played a fun game in college his friends called “sin or no sin?” The game was to bring up an action—“Say,” he said, “like smoking”—and then the group would have to use Scripture to argue whether that thing was a sin or not. My first reaction to him was, *What kind of lame college did you go to?* But I've played that same game with myself. Is this a sin or not a sin? If it's fun, does that mean it's a sin? *Dear God, I'm sorry...Dear God, I'm sorry...*

I'm sorry I'm a constant disappointment.

I've spent a lot of time around really good Christians, the kind who humbly waved me off when I told them they have it all together. "I'm just *redeemed*," they tell me. Like they woke up one morning refreshed and free and never looked back because life with Jesus was just so much better than anything else in the whole world. My repentance was never one-and-done. I stood with my hands on my hips looking at my daily sins and thinking, *What am I going to do with this?*

If the heart were a home for Jesus, it needed to be cleaned up a little bit before He moved in—as though God were a nosey house guest who would run his fingers across every countertop to make sure I'd dusted recently. I've never been able to stop cleaning. I keep finding stray socks and strands of hair and piles of crumbs and dust bunnies under the couch. The problem with that, I think, is that Jesus never gets to fully set up shop because I'm zooming around trying to tidy things up, calling out, "Just a minute, Jesus. Just a minute, Jesus," over my shoulder.

Growing up in a life steeped with Christianity means I've become familiar with definitions. I thought I knew the word repentance—had not only known it but breathed it in and lived it—but one morning I was in church and the pastor told us that repentance was not feeling sorry, the word itself meant to change our ways. It was about persistence, not perfection. Character takes a lot of time to develop. I tended to think the scales fell off the Apostle Paul's eyes and he leapt up, found a ship heading into dangerous territory, and immediately began taking down the New Testament as God whispered it into his ear. What I hadn't realized was that there were seventeen years between Paul being struck blind on the road to Damascus and him stepping into his destiny to spread the gospel.

There must have been times during those seventeen years, and even afterward, that Paul didn't wake up feeling redeemed. I think the best part of the whole story was that Paul didn't

clean his heart up and shuffle up to Jesus, hoping he was clean enough to be chosen. Paul was in the middle of “breathing out murderous threats” when God came out of nowhere and told him it was time to do something different.¹² Change his ways. Repent.

I don't think repentance is sin-focused so much as grace-focused. I'm allowed to invite God in to help me move the heavy furniture so I can dust underneath. That's the thing about grace, I think. I don't have to meet a level of cleanliness to get it. Now instead of *Dear God, I'm sorry*, the prayer goes: *Oh, hello. I'm a mess today.* And grace says, *That's okay. Everybody's got a little bit of mess. If they didn't they wouldn't be human. Let's work on it together.*

My pastor also told us that sometimes we think of grace and the Holy Spirit as a single glass of water we pour out for the rest of our lives. We're only given so much of it. But it's rather a living, ever-flowing stream of water. One that never runs dry. Thank goodness for that.

¹² Acts 9, NIV.

Apocalypse Now

*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.
—2 Peter 3:10 (NIV)*

Billboards line the side of the road all the way up I-65, ones with sunny clouds on the right and dark flames on the left, and bold red font asking if I died today, would I be going to heaven or hell? Dial 80-THE-TRUTH to be saved. I'm already an anxious driver—sometimes I have to scream out loud in order to psych myself up to merge into oncoming traffic on the interstate—and though I might already be saved, those signs are enough to convert me all over again as I fly along, white-knuckled down the asphalt.

That sort of fear over where I'm headed began in earnest when I picked up the *Left Behind: The Kids* series as a child. My brother had a whole collection of them, all lined up on the bookshelf in his room. The books were slim volumes with brightly colored spines. They told stories of children who were left behind in end times when God raptured their parents and guardians. I only read a few chapters into the first one when my nerves wouldn't let me get any further. My imagination took hold and wondered what would happen if I were left behind too. When I couldn't find family members I thought were in the house, my mind immediately jumped to the fact that they'd been raptured and I'd been left behind because I wasn't saved. I would walk through rooms trying to keep my hysteria in check, checking for any piles of clothes that would be all that was left of them when they'd been taken up to heaven. When they appeared around a corner, fully clothed and intact, a wave of relief would rush through my body.

I felt very sure the rapture could and would happen at any moment, without warning like it said in the Bible. God would happily smite us at His leisure. Earth was a ticking time bomb, and every tremor suggested it was about to blow. Signs of end times included anything in culture

or current events that suggested a turn from biblical ideals toward sin, illness, war, and natural disasters. According to Bible teachers at my Christian school, we were already seeing signs from Revelation come to fruition. One teacher walked us through chapters of Revelation and stopped at Revelation 9:7-9:

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle.¹³

He had us go verse by verse, and asked us what this passage reminded us of. From the back of class, someone murmured, *helicopters*. He told us we were exactly right. Think of the metal armored bodies of helicopters, the faces resembling human faces could be the pilots in the cockpits, and the thundering sounds of the wings were helicopter blades.

Out of chaos came the obvious explanation: Jesus was coming back.

Was I ready?

That was the altar call at the conclusion of many evangelical sermons. "If Jesus came back today, would you be ready?" Though we looked down on the radical fire and brimstone sermons of our Southern Baptist neighbors in their steepled churches down the street, we asked the same question and extended the invitation to congregants to turn their lives around that very moment. Some pastors would say it almost shyly, hands clasped behind their backs, scuffing the toe of their shoe against the stage before looking up at the congregation and spreading their hands with a sheepish, *don't shoot the messenger, it's just the truth!* look. Other pastors grew

¹³ NIV.

serious, leaning forward as they paced across the stage and swept their eyes across those gathered, dropping their voice to a near whisper before raising it to a shout to drive the point home. A “come to Jesus moment.” And come quick, before He comes to you.

We were *evangelicals*, called to take the good news to the darkest corners of the world. It was an urgent and crucial mission, as the world could end at any moment. We had to evangelize now, or risk the souls of friends, loved ones, and strangers languishing in hell forever. Their fates would be my fault, because I didn’t share the gospel with them.

It was never too early to start sharing one’s faith with the unsaved. In the third grade I joined the M&M Kids’ Club, an after-school missionary club where we ate M&M’s while learning about missionaries and were given gospel tracts to pass out. I rode my bike around my neighborhood, depositing the tracts in neighbors’ mailboxes. And I felt good afterward, like I had checked the evangelism box and God would be so pleased with me He’d take me up to heaven with all of the other Christians. I was set for a while before I’d need to fill my evangelizing quota again. It was much easier to hand out a gospel tract than explain my testimony and what I believed and why. I wanted to, but I didn’t know how. Pastors and teachers would break the testimony down into three easy-to-follow parts: life before Jesus, when Jesus saved me, and life after Jesus. It was a simple formula, but for someone who grew up in the church, there was no before and no after. There was only Jesus, all the time. How was I supposed to explain to someone what it meant to be born again when I felt more like I had been “born into” Christianity?

When I was in middle school, I heard a “come to Jesus” sermon at church where the pastor told us he had gathered a group of believers together and asked them who had led someone to Christ in the past year. And what about in all their lives? Perhaps two out of the

whole group had. He told us we needed to do better at sharing our faith. I left church and felt guilty about my failings as a Christian, but I didn't evangelize anyone that day, or the day after, or the day after. Living in a Christian bubble where it was only Jesus, all the time, meant I didn't know that many non-Christians who I could evangelize. I went to church and youth groups and Christian school and Christian summer camp. Who was there to tell?

That pastor also told us the story of a family friend, an old woman who refused to join her family on a trip to the movie theater. Her reasoning was that Jesus could come back at any moment, and if He chose that moment to come back, what would He think if He found her in the theater watching a mindless, unChristian movie rather than praying at home? She wanted to be raptured on her knees in prayer, so that was how she spent her life. The pastor told us what a beautiful picture this was of how we should live our lives every day—always ready.

How should I live, I wondered, when the world could end at any moment? Should I stay home and read my Bible all hours of the day? Should I buy handfuls of gospel tracts and stand on street corners with a sandwich board trying to flag people down to hear about the imminent end of the world? Should I sell my possessions and take the gospel to unreached peoples across the earth? Was I less of a Christian if I didn't do any of those things? I imagined thousands of good Christians ascending through the air, bodies limp, faces upturned to heaven. And me, always me, left behind.

If Christians are supposed to be imitators of Christ, the most tuned-in one I've ever met is Jen: a soft-spoken, middle-aged mother of four. She is an elder at my church, and I credit her with being the hands of Jesus when I needed Him to reach me on more than one occasion. She once led me through a two-hour-long prayer session and watched me bawl the whole way, the same prayer session where she told me I needed to unlearn everything I had been taught growing

up. I went to a class where Jen spoke on hearing the voice of God and told us she hated the idea of “callings” because that word carried a lot of baggage.

“Our calling,” she said, “is to glorify God and enjoy Him, and it is a gift that we get to do it *this* way, whatever way we do our daily lives. We are called to love Him, and we could do that while working at a gas station or while browsing the aisles at the grocery store.

“Think about this,” she continued. “This is the God of the universe, and His chosen name that He asks we call Him is ‘My Father.’”

I don’t know, something about that talk made a sense of peace fill my chest, loosening the fear that had gripped my heart since reading the first chapters of the *Left Behind* series. God, a *father*, a good one. Not the type to leave a child behind, not the type to forget or abandon His kid. Instead of fearing the end of the world, standing with my toes to the edge of the universe, ignoring the world around me as I prepared to leap into eternity, maybe I should just take the invitation to live and love well during my time on earth. It was an invitation from a god who didn’t have a fist raised above the earth, ready to smite, but a God who had already come once to serve a horrible, broken world—a God who came for me—and would do it again. Maybe, just maybe, a life lived in hope rather than urgent, overhanging dread would be a greater gospel testament than a sandwich board.

Conclusion: This Church

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

—Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV)

When I first walked into this church, I was testing out a new church each week before deciding where I would spend Sunday mornings in my new city. This was the first time I had chosen a church for myself, and I came through the doors wary and guarded—turning my head this way and that to take in the hip atmosphere and young crowd that continued to buzz with conversation even when someone stood at the front to start the morning announcements, listening for any biblical inaccuracies that may have come out in the sermon, and trying to gauge the authenticity of the smiles and warm welcomes. I held the church at arms length but kept coming back anyway, drawn by the way people seemed eager to know each other and how strangers drew their chairs toward other strangers to pray, rearranging the neat rows into clumps without hesitation.

Maybe it was refreshing to discover the church hadn’t made this building cool for the purpose of making church cool. They rented the space out on a weekly basis: six days of the week the building was a concert venue with alcohol flowing from the bar, but on Sundays it became a church and the bar served homemade bread and grape juice. I discovered they had chosen this location because it was close to downtown, across the street from a refuge for homeless men, just a block or so away from the hustle of downtown Nashville and Broadway where it felt like a church did not belong among the noisy bars and neon lights. They had wanted to be close to the places other churches weren’t, places other churches would visit but did not set

up shop. They would have chosen any building as long as it was close to the people they wanted to serve.

Maybe it was the way the worship music didn't vibrate the walls with powerful volume, but filled the space humbly. There were no strobe lights or choirs in robes. Worship was led by one guy who stood in front of everyone with his guitar. It was soft enough that I could hear the voices swell around me, everyone singing. We gathered close to each other when we headed to the bar top for communion. When the service was over we all pitched in to fold our chairs up and stack them on rolling carts. The baptistry was a transportable horse trough that got rolled out for baptism nights.

Maybe it was the young faces in the crowd. So many of them were my age, and they came each Sunday like they wanted to be there and wanted to know each other as more than faces in rows. Maybe it was the people who saw me. Jen, who has my mother's name. After hearing *Have you prayed about it?* all my life, I owe her everything for sitting down with me and instead saying *Let's talk to God*. She taught me I did not have to do it on my own. She saw me at my worst and got down into it with me. She showed me that there was immeasurable grace for straggling Christians. Maybe it was the small group leader who told me God would rather I fight Him than turn away, whose words became the permission I didn't know I needed to finally break and gather the pieces. Maybe it was the pastor who told us God did not desire perfection but persistence. Grace was not a limited cup of water to be poured out in drops, but a rushing river from a never ending spring. There was always more.

So I stayed at this church. I became greeter some Sundays, and I hung out by the front doors with an older man named Lewis who played the spoons professionally. Lewis always took the spot closest to the door, even in the winter, so the other greeters could stand closer to the

warmth inside. He sat in his wheelchair and pulled his flap cap down over his head because he thought the tattoos on his bald skull might scare people. “They’re from another time in my life,” he told me. A time when he lost too many people to drugs and alcohol and broke into cars for money. I told him no one here minded. We were all the same kind of clean and redeemed.

“Jesus saved me,” Lewis said.

“Me too,” I said.

Every so often the church skipped Sunday service to meet at Kroger and buy out aisles of diapers and imperishable food. We loaded them into a trailer in the parking lot so they could be taken to a local food pantry. We commissioned believers who were going out to plant a church or serve overseas by stretching our hands out toward them and praying out loud together. Before this church I had never prayed that way: all of our voices calling out to God at once. I asked strangers to pray for me too, and never felt judged or less than. I cried in front of people I’d never met before after asking them to pray the old anger and bitterness would be taken out of me. They told me inner healing was removing the things that keep us from the fullness of God and who God made us to be. I’m working on it.

Oh, this faith. It’s a transformative thing. I have been a seeker, a skeptic, a giver, a taker, a righteous follower, a reluctant evangelist, a quiet straggler and a bold apologist, a frequent inhabitant of Christianity’s lost and found bin. This faith is ink-blotted, tear-stained, frayed, and patched up. But it is wholly and irrevocably *mine*.

This church is not a building comfortably nestled in a permanent, well-kept home. The Church has never been a building though, has it? It’s not the building but the people in it, imperfect, but saved. It is a mission extending past the walls. It spills over borders and joins in Jesus’ mission to save lives. I leave on Sundays feeling lightweight, not heavy. Convicted but

never condemned. I ask people to come to church with me, to meet the Jesus who lives there. I catch glimpses of the holy land I've been looking for, of the Kingdom of God brought to earth. I listen for the still, small voice. It never fails to say *Welcome home*.

This Holy Land

A Young Believer's Search for True Faith in Evangelical Christian Subculture

Scholarly Reflection

Over the years, I became adept at being perceived as a “good” Christian. Following the rules was easy; the hard part was discerning why I followed the rules. Did I live this way out of love and reverence for God, or out of the desire to be praised by other Christians and have them confirm my faithfulness? I have confessed sins aloud, but it has always been more challenging for me to confess doubts like this. It is like dissolving the very base of my personal belief system: the most simple ideology, that a God I love is at the center of it all. Why is it so hard to admit these things? In *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, author Kenda Creasy Dean writes of how intimately linked religious ideology and identity are:

“Ancient youth like Jacob and Esau grew up at a time when questions like, ‘Who are my people? Why am I here? What gives my life meaning and coherence?’ were answered, literally, by the faith of their fathers...Yet these questions of belonging, purpose, and ideology remain at the core of human identity; while we have learned to think of them as psychological issues, such questions have historically fallen to religion to answer,

ritualized in the traditions and practices of communities that seek to embody a particular story of identity.”¹⁴

As my mind formed throughout childhood, church remained solidly at the forefront. I was steeped in religion, and it had developed my identity. To lose it would mean to lose myself, to strip myself down to nothing and try to start again. By questioning it, I was questioning not only my own identity, but the identity of the community I loved and was loved by in return. It was simply easier to muddle through on my own, holding my hidden doubts close while doing my best to find purpose and reassurance in the sanctuaries I created for myself. I felt safest that way, but it was counterfeit security. It was built on emotion and a desire to belong, not trust and belief.

As a young believer, I have spent much of my life working to find peace with belonging in my Evangelical Christian tradition. It was only in the last five years that I began coming to terms with the idea that the fulfilling, divine connection I sought may not be achievable within the tradition I had been passed by the believers who came before me. I am not the only young believer leaning toward this kind of separation from the religious tradition of her youth. According to Creasy Dean, “Three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christians, and most are affiliated with a religious organization—but only about half consider it very important, and fewer than half actually practice their faith as a regular part of their lives.”¹⁵ By those numbers, 75 percent claimed to be Christians at the time of the study, but of that percentage, 37.5

¹⁴ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁵ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 10.

percent considered their faith important, and of that percentage, fewer than 18.8 percent practiced faith in their everyday lives.

So this is not just an issue of kids leaving church, it is also an issue of young believers truly believing in God and the power of Christian faith, and dedicating their lives to that faith. When I attended high school student ministry, my pastor would often speak about how many students stopped following God once they left home after high school. According to the statistics, he was not wrong. Churches have experienced a gradual exodus of younger generations over the last two decades. 76 percent of Baby Boomers describe themselves as Christian, but only 49 percent of Millennials do.¹⁶ 66 percent of young adults stop attending church after high school, and although some do return to church later in life, 68 percent do not.¹⁷ The Barna Group made similar discoveries in a 2020 study, which suggests young believers grow “less Christian” as they move away from their parents.¹⁸

At the time I listened to my pastor’s warnings, I could not fathom a life without my faith. But after a lifetime of questioning whether or not my faith was legitimate, whether or not God was real, and whether or not it was worth hurting those around me by continuing to make excuses for the hateful actions of my fellow Christians—I was enticed by the idea of a life free from it if it meant breaking free from the constant guilt and fear this religion had instilled in me.

This thesis is designed to follow my journey through religion as I trace my beliefs backwards in hopes of unveiling what I believe and why and move toward an authentic, informed faith of my own. It is a literary pilgrimage of sorts to what I have referred to as a “holy

¹⁶ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, last modified 17 October 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

¹⁷ “Most Teenagers Drop out of Churches as Young Adults,” Lifeway Research, last modified 15 January 2019, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

¹⁸ “Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith,” Barna Group, last modified 4 March 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

land,” a land of promise, where I hope to find a more true faith for myself. I am just one young believer, and this thesis is based on my personal experiences. However, as the statistics show, this journey of challenging the religion of one’s youth would be familiar to many young Christians. During the journey of writing this thesis, I have held my belief system under a microscope, and in doing so, have questioned my identity, my relationship with culture, my duties to God and my family, and my place as a woman within a religious tradition.

This is why I have chosen the personal essay as my mode for this thesis. “Essay” comes from the word *essai*, which means “to attempt.” These essays are my attempt to understand something I do not know. *What caused me to question my beliefs? What brought me to a breaking point with faith? Why did I remain a Christian?* I worked to approach these questions and topics with openness and curiosity and used the act of writing them as a technique of contemplation and self-investigation.

I never thought myself the type to wander from what I believed. I was always the girl in her Sunday best at the early service, the one who went to youth groups and church camps and stepped down the banks of a pond in the summer so the murky waters would wash away her sins. I never thought myself the type to wonder what it would feel like to wander elsewhere, and I certainly never thought myself the type to strike an ultimatum with God the way I did at the height of my questioning whether or not I believed in this faith tradition: *Either You show up, or I go*. Wander connotes lost, turned off the straight and narrow, straying from a goal or purpose. A sheep wanders away from its flock, a prodigal son wanders far from home, an Israelite wanders the wilderness without hope of seeing the Promised Land. Wander is designless movement and aimless going. It is lonely, unholy, and suggests that straying feet will find themselves slipping into the open maw of hell, which sits hungry and ready to swallow the lost little lamb who failed to shackle herself to the Sunday morning pew.

The word “wander” used in a religious sense makes me a little uncomfortable. Perhaps, that is, until I met Montaigne, the father of the personal essay, from whom I learned that expressing doubts and questions did not make one less knowledgeable, respectable, or Christian. From Montaigne, I learned to meander through whatever ideas took hold of my mind, allowing myself to step away and investigate them. I have memories of my upbringing in the Evangelical Christian tradition that did not sit right, questions that had never been answered, and topics I had not yet approached—things that arose in hushed conversations among friends that we were too afraid to bring up in church, but we thought about regardless. There are things about the religion I was raised in that still get under my skin, and things I wish I would have been taught growing up. This was unexplored territory, and it was the open space my mind returned to consistently. It demanded attention whenever I opened a blank page. It is by wandering that these things become more approachable and clear.

Maybe I got caught on the idea of the Israelite’s Holy Land as a place of prosperity and comfort. In reality, I think the Holy Land was simply, at its heart, a place of promise. The promise I am holding to in my search for my own metaphorical holy land is the one expressed in Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”¹⁹ It is not so much a holy land as it is the kingdom of God brought earthside, into intimacy with the believer in a way I never believed was possible for myself. As the Israelites demonstrated and as I have experienced, the promise does not always come easily, but it is something worth seeking. In the end, perhaps I am not left with all of the answers, but I am left holding a biblical faith that belongs—for once—to me, and the courage to continue seeking what I believe to be true.

¹⁹ NIV.

Birthplace (*n.*) *Place of birth or origin*

I cannot ascertain the birthplace of my faith without thinking about several key players: the churches and church groups described in “Sanctuary,” my family influences as discussed in “Faithful,” and the educational atmosphere and middle-class culture I write of in “This Holy Land.” As communal as a faith journey is, I believe the experiences I had within these influential communities also made me realize a need for personal conviction and internalized change. Faith is not something I can rest on the shoulders of a community and expect them to carry for me. It is also not something I should blindly take for truth, simply because it is what those around me believe. In my introductory essay, “On Seeking,” I described this as borrowing the faith of others rather than discovering it for myself. Someone else’s convictions can only bring me so far. Then it comes time to leap out on my own.

At the time I sat on the porch mentioned in “Sanctuary” and questioned my reasons for being on a spiritual retreat, I was a spiritual life assistant: a spiritual counselor for a group of young college women. I feared that by expressing my doubts I would be deemed unfit to lead, and I feared losing the respect and care of my faith community as a result. This was the same fear I faced when realizing my beliefs were beginning to differ from that of my family members. Growing up, I often equated biblical beliefs with lifestyle beliefs. To be faithful meant to believe, live, and vote a certain way. This was the faith legacy I inherited—one in which the gospel was interpreted to fit the life we wanted. It seemed that instead of changing our lives to fit the faith the Bible outlines, the Bible was twisted to fit our lives.

I have questioned the faith tradition my mother passed to me, which was passed to her by her father. How we could get so many things right, and still get so many things wrong? I cannot know the personal faith or hearts of my family members, but I can look at the way their faith is manifested—the fruit it produces—and gain a deeper understanding of what I believe and why.

In “Faithful,” I explored one particular aspect of my faith legacy: our reaction to social injustice as Christians. In 2020, Barna Group conducted research on the Christian response to the explosion of racial injustice awareness across the United States: “As of the July 2020 survey, practicing Christians—self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important in their lives and have attended a worship service within the past month—are no more likely to acknowledge racial injustice (43% “definitely”) than they were the previous summer. There is actually a significant increase in the percentage of practicing Christians who say race is “not at all” a problem in the U.S. (19%, up from 11% in 2019).”²⁰ I wrestled with the hurt, anger, and frustration that came when my family turned away from reconciliation, unable to understand how a message of all-encompassing love could exist alongside racism.

It can be a painful tearing as I separate myself from the religion of my parents and grandparents, but I am inclined to believe I must undergo this change in order for my own heart to be healed and so I can take part in healing the fractures between Christianity and culture. I began the essay “Faithful” with a quote from Mary Oliver. In the poem, “Lead,” Mary Oliver writes: “I tell you this / to break your heart, / by which I mean only / that it break open and never close again / to the rest of the world.”²¹ I can allow the pain to break my heart in a way that it opens to a new way of life—a life, perhaps, much closer to Jesus’ desire for my existence, one not marked by comfort but by radical selflessness. Heartbreak becomes an invitation to open my heart, my arms, and my life to the mess of the world as I work to be a part of its healing process.

When it comes to maintaining the comfortable, aloof status-quo I outlined in “Faithful” and “This Holy Land,” I see this Christianity as a comfortable tradition that focuses on outward

²⁰ “White Christians Have Become Even Less Motivated to Address Racial Injustice,” Barna Group, last modified 15 September 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/american-christians-race-problem/>.

²¹ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems: Volume 2* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007).

appearance over the state of the heart. This tradition is also commonly referred to as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Kenda Creasy Dean, author of *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, writes that, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has little to do with God or a sense of divine mission in the world. It offers comfort, bolsters self-esteem, helps solve problems, and lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good, and keep God at arm’s length.”²² In essence, this version of Christianity is a consumer religion, one in which good behavior secures salvation and God becomes a distant cosmic genie who helps the faithful achieve success.²³ As long as we did the right things, gave to the church, went on short-term mission trips, etc., we would be in good standing. This way of life is virtue signaling: were we serving out of faith, or exploiting for our own benefit?

Legalism, though it rests on the other end of the spectrum, also falls under this idea of Christianity as a consumer lifestyle religion. If MTD shows God as always loving no matter the believer’s actions, legalism demands strict adherence to religious rules, while deviation means disappointing a wrathful God. Author and pastor Jeff Robinson refers to legalism as, “[Seeking] to earn favor with God through both keeping the law and misappropriating it to extrapolate a set of personal convictions—often related to modes of dress, music, movies, etc.—that become a system of expected ethical norms to which [believers] hold both themselves and other Christians.”²⁴ A legalistic approach to Christianity results in policing the lifestyles of believers, and can also lead to an “Us” and “Them” mentality between Church-goers and non-Church-goers. Like MTD, this tradition also values outward appearance over the state of the heart.

²² Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 29.

²³ Brian Cosby, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: Not Just a Problem with Youth Ministry,” *The Gospel Coalition*, last modified 9 April 2012, www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mtd-not-just-a-problem-with-youth-ministry/.

²⁴ Jeff Robinson, “Why Legalism Destroys Churches and Kills Christians,” *Southern Equip*, last modified 3 August 2018, equip.sbts.edu/article/legalism-destroys-churches-kills-christians/.

We, the Evangelical Christians, had it right. We would take not only our gospel, but our values as a capitalist country and knowledge of the “right way” to live as Americans to those less fortunate. From the time Protestants touched down on America’s shoreline, this land has been a realization of what they dreamed, prayed, and longed for. This desire for freedom bred a revolution that birthed a country, one built on a mix of biblical and capitalist ideals. Americans have always taken what they think is their natural right: their manifest destiny. A threat to their core beliefs would be the equivalent of a war cry and direct attack on their way of life as Americans. The defensiveness that results from this extends to the way my faith tradition sees challenges to their faith. The Evangelical Christian subculture I grew up in taught the rare value of this Christian life we were able to live. An attack on the country’s values was an attack on our right to practice our religion the way we wanted to practice it.

As I examined in “This Holy Land,” It was easier to play the role of white savior and take the gospel to the distant “them” than it was to take it to those directly outside our walls. I have friends who are gay, who believed their sexuality and faith are mutually exclusive. I have friends who suffer from severe mental illness, who wondered why faith would not heal them. That is all they have been taught. If pain is the signal the body sends to the brain to let it know something is wrong, I see the fact that this cultural Christianity is hurting people as a sign it is not entirely biblical. I think back to 2 Timothy 4:12. If we believe that the youth can set an example of true faith, perhaps we should trust them when they begin leaving their faith tradition. Maybe instead of clinging to the traditional way of doing things, we should back it up to the start and find the heart of the gospel once again.

Crossing (*n.*) *The intersection of the nave and transept in a cruciform church. (n.) A place where one thing crosses another.*

Like a crossing is a place of intersection, meeting, changing over, and choice, the essays in this section describe places of transition. I transitioned from sure belief into more challenging doubts. I transitioned from making excuses for my fellow believer's actions to wondering if there were a better way to live. I began wondering what it really looked like to live as a saved Christian. After a lifetime of following religious motions rather than undergoing true, freeing transformation as promised in the Bible, I still felt trapped and heavy with guilt.

I wrestled with these feelings in "Holy Water," where my baptism felt more like a religious motion motivated by fear rather than a dedication of my life to God motivated by love. I was aware of this and felt like a lesser Christian because of it, but years of completing the motions over and over again had caught me in a cycle of actions dictated by worry rather than allowing those motions to alter my heart and life. Therefore, rather than crossing into sure Christianity, after my baptism I crossed into further doubt.

I believe I confused the purpose of baptism by thinking it the moment of conversion rather than the starting point of transformation. I expected a feeling, a sort of cleansing peace that would continue long after I left the water. I see what I experienced as the distinction between "religion" and "relationship." My faith was a religion based on checking boxes and living a certain way. I assumed that once I fulfilled what I saw as religious duties, it would lead to the promised internal transformation. This left me feeling unfulfilled, haunted by worry that I was not doing enough. Relationship, on the other hand, is a change of heart first, followed by actions as a response. Until I reached that point in my faith much later, I would continue to trying save myself by living the way my faith community told me to live.

I believe that part of the reason why I felt religious motions were crucial to my faith was my tradition's emphasis on cultural lifestyle values, mostly those colored by fundamentalist ideals. Christian fundamentalism was born in 1919 as a counterrevolution to the culture-wide

movement toward modernism in the United States.²⁵ In his 2019 *New York Times* article, “The Day Christian Fundamentalism Was Born,” history professor and author Matthew Avery Sutton writes of how, in the wake of World War I, the rise of modernism marked a separation from belief systems—including the rejection of religious principles—to embrace primitivism, which suggested the way to social progress was through releasing the natural, morbid, and sexual desires civilization requires people to suppress.²⁶ I found myself isolated in a socio-political subculture, one which seemed to equate a life of faith and obedience to God with a Christian lifestyle, which included an emphasis on rejecting secular culture—i.e. certain modern interpretations of science, much contemporary entertainment, and specific cultural movements—in favor of Christian media, political values, and education.

One of the most visible, lasting, and impactful aspects of this lifestyle that strongly affects young Christian women like myself today are the purity ideals I describe in “Sex Ed.” Over time, I have begun to unravel a lifetime of religious education that affected the way I viewed myself, those around me, and God’s nature. The events in “Sex Ed” follow my battle to relearn a sexual narrative after experiencing the damaging one I spent so much of my life learning. However, though I began a mental crossing in this essay from one way of thinking to another, fear of rejection left over from an education that expressed how disappointed a community, and God, would be as a result of slipping in this way of life held me back from making a complete change of direction.

This fear of rejection is a common one for women raised to follow the ideals of the Evangelical purity movement. The Evangelical purity movement began in the 1990s as a

²⁵ Matthew Avery Sutton, “The Day Christian Fundamentalism Was Born,” *The New York Times*, last modified 25 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/opinion/the-day-christian-fundamentalism-was-born.html>.

²⁶ “History of Modernism,” Miami Dade College, accessed 12 February 2020, www.mdc.edu/wolfson/academic/artsletters/art_philosophy/humanities/history_of_modernism.htm.

campaign to caution young Protestant Christians against premarital sex. The movement produced a “purity culture” further incensed by Joshua Harris’ sensational book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1998) in which the author suggests Christians abandon traditional dating in favor of biblical courtship, which would thereby produce more fulfilling marriages and sex lives for believers. This idea of biblical courtship is also championed by Sarah Mally, author of *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity* (2006), the book that still sits on a shelf in my parents’ home today. Mally writes of the benefits to abandoning dating culture from a female perspective, and tells us that exchanging dating for courtship includes a young woman remaining under her father’s authority and protection until he finds her a suitable husband.

Dating never fully went away in Christian circles, but it did come under stricter guidelines as purity gained importance among Christian parents and teens. Christian parents who had experienced the pitfalls of sexual liberation in the 1960s sought more “wholesome” relationships for their children, and encouraged abstinence pledges, modest clothing, purity rings, and limited physical contact with the opposite sex.²⁷ Harris’ book gained traction, and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* sold a million copies and sparked a revolution among young people to stop dating. According to Harris, dating was a game that hurt people and prepared them for future divorces. By abstaining not only from sex, but embracing a life of purity without dating, Christians would trust in God to bring them their perfect spouse and happily ever after.

Harris, who was twenty-one at the time he wrote and published the book, has since spoken out against *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, even requesting his publisher cease printing it. In a 2018 *USA Today* op-ed, Harris writes that, “After listening to the stories and conducting a lengthy and sometimes painful process of re-evaluation, I reached the conclusion that the ideas in

²⁷ Richard Ostling, “What is ‘Purity Culture’?” *Patheos*, last modified 21 August 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/religionqanda/2019/08/what-is-purity-culture/>.

my book weren't just naïve, they often caused harm.”²⁸ He goes on to say that his book placed an emphasis on practices not mentioned in the Bible, like not kissing before marriage and not giving one's heart away. He admits his book set unrealistic expectations that honoring God during dating would lead to an amazing marriage and sex life later. That conclusion, he writes, is not based in Scripture.

Since writing that op-ed, Harris has renounced Christianity and divorced his wife of twenty-one years.²⁹ Although he issued an apology for his book and the fuel he added to the purity culture fire, the effects of his message live on in Christian sexual education. When I took Sex Ed in 2013, I signed an abstinence contract, wore a purity ring, and was instructed to dress modestly and date with caution. But it was not just about *living* a life of purity, it was also about retaining pure *thinking*. Even thinking of sex could turn into a sin issue, as it did not honor God with one's mind. The most pure way to live was to turn sexuality off in all its forms, carefully monitor one's body and mind, and run away from anything that could be considered tempting. I was advised to “watch my input,” which included rejecting movies, television, books, music, and any other secular media that portrayed sexual content.

Many young Christian women spend a lifetime believing sexual thoughts and feelings are dirty and should be repressed. But when they do marry, the expectation is that they will feel free to reverse that mode of thinking and turn their sex drive back on with the simple idea that “sex is okay now.” Linda Kay Klein, author of *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation and How I Broke Free*, explains how that is not always possible. In an interview with

²⁸ Joshua Harris, “‘I Kissed Dating Goodbye’ Author: How and Why I’ve Rethought Dating and Purity Culture,” *USA Today*, last modified 26 November 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2018/11/23/christianity-kissed-dating-goodbye-relationships-sex-book-column/2071273002/>.

²⁹ Joshua Bote, “He wrote the Christian Case Against Dating. Now he’s Splitting from his Wife and Faith,” *USA Today*, last modified 29 July 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/29/joshua-harris-i-kissed-dating-goodbye-i-am-not-christian/1857934001/>.

NPR, she divulges how her deep anxiety around sexuality manifested as eczema whenever she would have sexual thoughts or feelings, or would make a sexual choice. For many women, she continues, the deep-rooted shame and anxiety associated with sex would cause panic attacks that required hospitalization.³⁰

The psychological trauma and PTSD that results from demonizing sex is also furthered by the idea that women fall into two groups, according to Klein: the pure and impure. Being pure includes assuming responsibility for stewarding the sexuality of men by dressing modestly and being the one responsible for saying “no.” Men are portrayed as sexually weak and unable to resist the temptation of a woman’s body, leaving the blame to fall on the woman for engaging in “impure” behavior and leading a man with her. When a person’s worth is diminished to the status of their virginity—which they may or may not have chosen to lose—the division between pure and impure women exacerbates a sense of shame, but also a sense of worthlessness. If a godly man is out searching for a godly virgin, why would he choose a woman who has chosen sin?

According to professor and author of *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles*, Julie Inersoll, “The woman’s sexual purity is what is of most value to the man.”³¹ The best gift a woman could give her husband is the gift of her body, untouched and pure, reserved just for him. And because she did not sully herself with premarital sex, they will enjoy a great sex life. To harken back to Harris’ apology op-ed, this promise is not found

³⁰ Linda Kay Klein, “Memoirist: Evangelical Purity Movement Sees Women’s Bodies as a ‘Threat,’” interview by Terry Gross, *NPR*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/18/648737143/memoirist-evangelical-purity-movement-sees-womens-bodies-as-a-threat>.

³¹ Julie Ingersoll, “How the ‘Extreme Abstinence’ of the Purity Movement Created a Sense of Shame in Evangelical Women,” *The Conversation*, last modified 10 December 2019, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-extreme-abstinence-of-the-purity-movement-created-a-sense-of-shame-in-evangelical-women-127589>.

anywhere in Scripture. The idea that if we do *this*, God will honor us with *that*, looks to me like a well-disguised works-based prosperity gospel.

The effects of purity culture can be hugely damaging to young women, something I did not fully grasp until I began talking with other girls who were raised in my faith tradition. Hearing their stories and the deep, lasting effects of the sexual education they received led me to a place of crossing with my belief system. This teaching I had once seen as necessary and beneficial now seemed cruel and damaging—not simply damaging to the individual woman taught to believe that virginity was the sum of her worth, but also damaging to a Christian community pitted against one another as the “pure” and “impure.”

Once I began distancing myself from this faith tradition and listening to the stories of other young believers who had similar experiences, I found it difficult to make excuses for the ways those within my faith tradition treated the very people we were called to love. This was a place of crossing, an intersection where I had to decide which way I would go: would I continue making excuses and feeding kind, but empty, words to those I was called to care for? Or would I instead not only *say* I loved these people, but *live* that love out as well? This is the place I found myself at with my friend Molly in the events I describe in “The Body Temple.” After seeing the way Christians in my tradition treated Molly and other young believers fighting mental health battles, I found the nagging doubt returning to my mind that perhaps this tradition was not the infallible way of living I had long thought it.

In 2018, Lifeway researcher Ed Stetzer published an article in *Christianity Today* about mental health conversations in the church, or more realistically, the lack of such conversations. Although 90% of pastors believe the church has a moral and spiritual responsibility to provide resources for those struggling with mental illness, only 33% speak to their congregations about

mental illness more than once a year.³² Gen Z is more likely to report mental health concerns, and speak more openly about them than their previous generations. 18% of Gen Z report having been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and 23% report being diagnosed with depression.³³

The statistics show that mental illness is an epidemic for the younger generation, and we want to talk about these things. Believers are not exempt, though in the schools and churches I have spent my life in, the narrative has typically centered around whether or not the believer has the faith that he or she will be healed. Relying on medication points to a lack of faith in God. For many young believers I have known, like Molly, if we assume we are responsible for fixing our mental health, we will also assume responsibility when our willpower is not enough. Instead of addressing the neurobiological roots of anxiety and treating it as a real medical problem, it seems much easier to pass around notecards with 1 Peter 5:7³⁴ written on them and explain that worrying only adds fuel to the fire so there is no point in doing it. Through enough faith and willpower, *huzzah*, we are healed.

Perhaps part of the reason Christians have such trouble with the mental health discussion is because we rarely live without hope. We are told darkness does not last and pain will one day end—but for Molly and others who suffer from debilitating mental illnesses that steal hope away, it is no wonder positive thinking is not enough to overcome depression and anxiety. Molly was turned off the church because of the way Christians treated her. She is passionately outspoken about her hate for Christians, and resents her parents for not doing more sooner. I am one of the few Christians she cares for, and though I continue to pursue her with a stubborn,

³² Ed Stetzer, “The Church and Mental Health: What do the Numbers Tell us?” *Christianity Today*, last modified 20 April 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/april/church-and-mental-health.html>.

³³ “Stress in America™: Generation Z,” *American Psychological Association*, last modified October 2018, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf>.

³⁴ “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.” NIV.

persistent love, internal emotional scars run deep. I wonder how things may have gone differently if she had been welcomed into the church body rather than regarded with suspicion and judgement, and came to the decision that my faith tradition had a desperate need to address these conversations and cross from one way of believing into another. After all, it is a matter of life and death.

Pathway (*n.*) *A route or way of access to; way of reaching or achieving something. (n.)*

Biochemistry. A series of reactions by which one organic substance is converted to another.

I saw pain evidenced again and again for young believers, which led me to believe this tradition could not be the most logical and best way of interpreting and living out the Bible. For a long time, my questions had made me feel like a shameful, lesser Christian, and I suppressed them in hopes they would eventually go away. They did not, and if anything, they grew more insistent that I do something about them. From those trails of doubt, I crossed into deeper skepticism and found myself on a pathway, one that I was not sure of the destination. I would either come out the other side in a better place with Christianity, or I would emerge not a Christian at all. When I reached the events I write in “Unravelling,” I was more than willing to go one way or the other, so long as that pathway led to truth.

In her introduction to *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans writes that;

“Church books are written by people with a plan and ten steps, not by Christians just hanging on by their fingernails. And yet I am writing. I am writing because I suspect the awkward teenager in the yearbook picture still has something to say about the world, some sort of hope to offer it, if nothing more than a few hundred pages of ‘me too.’ I am

writing because sometimes we are closer to the truth in our vulnerability than in our safe certainties.”³⁵

When I began discussing my thesis to other students, I had expected a few head nods, maybe even a “Cool,” here or there. It was just something that interested me, and the only topic I thought I could happily tap out thousands of words about. What I had not expected was nearly everyone I told to respond with their own story of growing up in religion. Some were Evangelical, others were Catholic, Methodist, or Lutheran. But they wanted to talk about it. It was almost like an altar call: a call to lay down our baggage and open the lines of conversation surrounding these religious traditions. We all wanted a reminder that we need not inherit the beliefs first given to us.

Sarah Bessey, author of *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith*, helped me gain some clarity on this desire to make my faith my own. She describes the difference between philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s first naiveté and second naiveté. In first naiveté, the believer stays faithful to what she was first taught without moving into deeper spiritual and theological questioning. In second naiveté, the believer distances herself from what she was first taught to find the inconsistencies in her faith and learn the role of logic in religion, pressing forward into a new understanding of God and a new desire for truth. Bessey quotes Søren Kierkegaard, who said, “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.”³⁶

This is a process of unravelling and releasing the faith knowledge I grew up with in order to discover truth for myself so I might finally “live forwards.” From Evans and Bessey I know

³⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), xvi.

³⁶ Sarah Bessey, *Out Of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith* (New York: Howard Books, 2015), 4.

there are Christians who have never felt safe admitting they walk the path of faith blindly, groping for the belief everyone else seems to have. There are Christians who have a stack of recommended books that have not touched the doubt and fear that crawl up their throats and threaten to choke what faith they have. There are Christians who tug their fraying hope into church on Sundays mornings and pray to be seen. There are some who have felt the shame of unbelief after crying out for help: *Lord, help my unbelief*. I do not have much to offer in the way of wisdom or comfort, but I can offer pages of “me too.” I found myself the most free when I gave up my old faith to chase after something better as I did after the prayer session in “Unravelling.”

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”³⁷ Although usually quoted in the context of not conforming to the patterns of secular culture, I would say this verse also applies to patterns of faith. There is no use clinging to someone else’s belief. I will only ever lose it. I move backwards, doing away with it in order to find my own. The journey to faith is not a linear path, but a twisty, winding way that is sometimes overgrown, hidden, and challenging to walk. But in the moments I do catch glimpses of the pathway and where it leads, something clicks in my heart and tells me *It is worth it to keep going*. So I do.

Tracing backwards led me to “Walk Back the Cat,” where I began examining the past in order to better understand the present and where the future might lead. Though I included the story of my teacher’s cat being possessed by a demonic spirit in this essay, “walk back the cat” is a real saying, one typically used in intelligence gathering that refers to when “Intelligence

³⁷ NIV.

analysts...apply what they know now as fact against what their agent said to expect.”³⁸

Essentially, to “walk back the cat” is to trace backwards, beginning with what is known in order to reconstruct and learn from the past. Most of my post-Christian school life has been spent wrestling with lessons and walking back the cat on my spiritual education, taking what I have learned since setting out on an exploration of my own faith and testing the past against it.

In this particular essay, I walked back the cat on the question asked by Jen in “Unravelling”: *When did I learn that barely grasping the back of Jesus’ cloak was the closest I would ever get to Him?* The answer, I think, goes back further than Mr. Reynolds’s class where I learned there was a world of spiritual depth I had never touched, and perhaps never would. Perhaps it went back as far as totems, the separation of the sacred and the profane, the stained glass windows that would be as close as the Christians who came before me would come to the Word of God. As I unravelled this idea of spiritual closeness being something I would only achieve in places of extreme ecstasy, between the walls of a sanctuary or in the darkest corners of the earth, I began finding that there were places where I *had* felt God move—ordinary places, ones that might never be labeled as sacred.

By believing I could only achieve spiritual closeness in certain ways, I limited God and myself. This essay traces the beginning of realizing that there could be *more* to my faith, and closeness with God was not something exclusive to some Christians. It was an invitation extended to all, and we did not need to achieve some certain level of righteousness before accepting it, even if that is what we have been led to believe.

In “All God’s Creatures,” I found myself at the intersection between two pathways I spent many years believing could be reconciled: science and religion. Could I be a true Christian

³⁸ William Safire, “Walk Back the Cat,” *New York Times*, last modified 29 April 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/29/opinion/walk-back-the-cat.html>.

who claimed she fully believed in God, but allowed herself to be ignorant to something as crucial as science? In the television series *Fleabag*, the title character (an atheist) falls in love with a Catholic priest. In one scene, the two characters are walking along together and the priest throws his arms out wide as though to gesture to *all this*. He cries out, “Why would you believe in something awful when you could believe in something wonderful?” And Fleabag responds, “Don’t make me an optimist, you will ruin my life.”³⁹ In the same way, I felt as though the kind signs we assigned meaning to, like my grandmother assigning her passed husband’s spirit to a bird, were nothing more than the use of religion to convince ourselves the worst possible alternative—our aloneness—was not the case.

I was raised on Biblical literalism—the belief that the Bible is to be interpreted literally regardless of changes in era or culture—which felt very much like I was holding my hands over my ears and singing to block out something awful while I clung to something wonderful. The Word of God was the Word of God, and that was the start and end of every argument. So when science came knocking, demanding my attention, I assumed I had to ignore it to be a proper Christian. Because we believed in the Bible, it meant we could not also believe in evolution or the big bang theory. I looked at science as though atheists had made it up because they hated God and people who believed in God.

I wrote of Mr. Gardner’s class in “All God’s Creatures,” because that was where I learned I did not have to turn my brain off to be a Christian, and it was possibly the most freeing discovery in all my education. Not only that, but the Bible instructed me to have answers for

³⁹ “Season 2 Episode 4,” *Fleabag*, BBC, 25 March 2019 [https://www.edp24.co.uk/going-out/fleabag-bbc-series-two-best-quotes-phoebe-waller-bridge-1-5990830#:~:text=4\)%20The%20Priest%3A%20%E2%80%9CWhy,you%20will%20ruin%20my%20life.%E2%80%9D.](https://www.edp24.co.uk/going-out/fleabag-bbc-series-two-best-quotes-phoebe-waller-bridge-1-5990830#:~:text=4)%20The%20Priest%3A%20%E2%80%9CWhy,you%20will%20ruin%20my%20life.%E2%80%9D.)

when someone asked me what I believed and why.⁴⁰ Even if we did not interpret each and every sentence of the Bible literally, it could still carry truth. For the first time, I felt free to ask questions and doubt, and I had a lot of both. I began unravelling the questions and exploring the doubts. I absorbed apologetics debates and theories in hopes they would help me reconcile the cognitive dissonance I felt toward my faith. It would take more than a lifetime for me to reach a point where I felt perfectly certain of everything I believed, but this was a starting point, a first step on a pathway that opened the door to a more informed faith and understanding of the nature of God.

Homeward (*n.*) *Toward home.*

It would be dishonest to believe that this is the end of my faith journey, but I believe this last section does point “homeward,” toward home. The unravelling and relearning continues, but I have now found a more hopeful holy land to aim toward. Crucial to this process is the vocabulary of faith I have developed, which bleeds into an understanding of how I live and how I view God.

Kathleen Norris wrote a book called *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, and in it she tells a story of a boy who wrote a damning psalm about the mess he had created in his house in his anger and frustration. She wrote that if that boy had been writing this as a fourth-century monk, “[H]is elders might have told him that he was well on the way to repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”⁴¹ Repentance is a turning point into new life, a call to come home. But the way this concept was often wrapped up and

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 3:15, NIV.

⁴¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 70.

presented to me was not a grace-filled call, but a call to prostration, self-flagellation, and shame. Repentance was begging for forgiveness. It was something to be avoided through preventative living: just do not break the rules. I challenged this definition of repentance in “Sin or No Sin,” where I returned to Norris’ idea of ourselves as a house we should make an appealing place for God to dwell. Sin was a disgusting thing, it was abhorrent to God and to Christians. It could not continue to exist where God had taken up residence. The problem, I write, is that I have never been able to stop cleaning my house.

Like Norris, I am taking time to pick apart the Christian vocabulary I learned and how those definitions that I was either taught or gathered or inflicted on myself shaped my life and ways of thinking. “Repentance” is a central word to the Christian faith. It is a command shouted from the pulpit or hawked from the sidewalk. It is a call to revival and renewal. Change my life now, in this moment. Go and sin no more. Get up and follow Jesus. But could the very thing designed to call me home be the very thing that kept me away from it? How could God ever take up living in a house that was constantly a mess despite salvation and my desperate efforts to make myself clean?

I concluded that repentance was not being very sorry and trying harder, but inviting God into the places I needed to change. In my clearer understanding of God’s nature and grace, I realized He was all about that. There was no person Jesus was too clean to touch: not Lazarus after he had spent several days decaying in a tomb; not lepers, society’s least desirable; not the demon-possessed; not prostitutes; not tax collectors; not the sick and injured. Grace had never turned away a fixer-upper.

In “Apocalypse Now,” I wondered what to do with this information. How should I live now, with this new understanding of faith and the tradition I was raised in? How did I take up

that call to come home and begin moving homeward? My religious tradition's answer was one that did not seem to fit.

Apocalyptic, end-time thinking was a normal and important part of my Evangelical faith tradition growing up. Because it was such a common topic of discussion, I never took the time to think about why that was or the wide-reaching implications of it. That is, until I read Matthew Avery Sutton's *New York Times* article, "The Day Christian Fundamentalism was Born."⁴² I also began tearing through his 2014 book, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*. From Sutton, I learned how intimately my modern faith was connected to the fundamentalist beliefs that arose after World War I. We did not necessarily call ourselves Christian fundamentalists, but it is easy to see the parallels. Especially once I found that famed evangelist Billy Graham was handed the fundamentalist torch by its founder and instructed to carry the movement on. After World War II, evangelicals tried to distance themselves from their fundamentalist predecessors, but they remained very similar.

Breaking down what Sutton's analysis, I can see how it manifested in my Evangelical faith:

"Fundamentalists believed that the world was going to end. Imminently. Violently. Tragically. This conviction defined their relationships to those inside and outside the faith. It conditioned their analysis of politics and the economy. It impacted how they voted and for whom. It determined their perspectives on social reform, moral crusades, and progressive change. It influenced the curriculum they brought into their schools and their views of American higher education. It defined their evaluation of alternative

⁴² Sutton, "The Day Christian Fundamentalism Was Born."

expressions of Christianity as well as competing religions. It framed their understanding of natural disasters, geopolitical changes, and war.”⁴³

The *Left Behind* kids’ series really did strike fear into my heart that I could not shake all through my childhood and adolescence. From graphic billboards to “come to Jesus” sermons featuring detailed descriptions of the end of the world and a future in hell, end times seemed to loom closer and closer with every hiccup in the world. It was also used as a reminder of the importance of evangelism and conversion. I have never felt as though my evangelism was good enough to count, though I knew that I had been a part of several faith journeys that ended in salvation, I had not always been there in the moment of official conversion and could not take credit for saving anyone.

Those inside the faith had a duty to evangelize. We also were expected to live every day as though it were the last, hence the praise for those who spent their days on their knees, prayerfully urging the return of Christ. For those outside the faith, I noticed we carried an “either/or” view of them. Unbelievers were either poor, uneducated sinners we needed to reach for Christ with compassion, or they were truly bad sinners who had chosen hell. For the latter, all we could do was wash our hands of them. Sometimes sharing the gospel felt like a one-and-done situation rather than a dedicated pursuit of an individual. Free will said I could lead a sinner to water but I could not make them get baptized.

Many Christians in this tradition also see it as their duty to influence politics and culture in order to make it align with the Bible. They vote for politicians who promise to pass policy in line with what Christians value in terms of abortion, gay marriage, and more. I took some time to

⁴³ Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2014), 3.

look back at the churches I went to as a child and young adult and read the core values pages on their websites. Many of these core values espouse political beliefs alongside biblical beliefs.

My Christian curriculum covered the big bang, end times, and just about everything in between. We discussed current events, our role as Christians in the world, and even learned debate tactics for defending our faith. We had whole class periods dedicated to talking about what faith would look like in higher education when we may be attending a secular university. Some of these conversations led me to believe I would inevitably be martyred in college.

I also saw an “us and them” mentality between evangelicals and other denominations. World religions were taught to me from a Christian perspective and worldview, which felt more like I was preparing to argue against these religions than understand them. Our beliefs also impacted the way we viewed global issues, like politics on Israel, and the way we often used natural disasters to remind ourselves these are harbingers of Jesus’ second coming. This was the way, it seems, we made sense of the chaos and brokenness of the world.

The end of the world—and the discussion of where I would be going—also influenced my view of God. One summer at church camp I was served two very different pictures of God by two different counselors back to back. One counselor painted God as a powerful overlord ready to strike us down as he told us what God expected from us, and the other counselor read us a devotion that called God our best friend. I was in elementary school at the time, and I had no idea how to reconcile so many different views on God’s nature. In many ways I felt as though I had already been left behind.

It felt fitting to begin this journey with “On Seeking” and end with “Apocalypse Now,” because both essays begin with scenes of chaos and trauma, but have disparate endings. In “On Seeking,” there is the absence of a father figure. I did not know what brought the woman to the abortion clinic in the documentary we watched, and I did not know the details of her decision,

but I felt her aloneness as she lay on the table, exposed and videotaped so her most vulnerable moment could be shown to thousands upon thousands of people who would not care to know her name or her side of the story. In my panicked faith, I often felt a sharp aloneness. I felt distant from God, whose nature and presence I was unsure of, a feeling echoed in the constant stress of “Apocalypse Now.” The God of the Bible did not entirely align with the god of pain and condemnation I saw evidenced.

This religion felt hysterical, chaotic, and traumatic. Brutal and unfeeling toward some, it elevated those who were best at living a certain way while stepping over the very people we were called to serve with love and compassion. With thought and lifestyle governed by rigid interpretations of Scripture, the fear and emotional intensity produced became the way so many young believers like myself experienced faith. I began this journey of exploring this religious tradition because this did not feel *right*. I had yet to know God despite spending my whole life steeped in this religion.

So I sought the God of the Bible, a father finally found in “Apocalyspe Now,” a good one who would never leave His child behind. I finally paused enough in my disorientation to realize this was a God who called me homeward not with overhanging dread, but with hope. The time between Jesus’ first and second coming began when He ascended, though I had always felt as though it was much more recent and urgent than that. We have been in that age of anticipation for thousands of years. Time has been running out for a long, long time, and every generation has held to this fear that they could be the ones to finally see the end. I decided it was time for me to think less on what I could not control and focus more on what I could: living and loving well. When I began living with this new view of God, the constant fear I had carried began lifting from my shoulders alongside my old ways of thinking.

So, how should I live now? I believe the life I write about in “This Church” is a starting point. I have separated myself from Christian fundamentalism and its ideals, and have instead found myself at a church grounded in what I believe to be a much more accurate, biblical picture of what Christianity is. This church welcomes all and serves all. Politics do not play a role in our core values and differing beliefs do not drive congregants apart. I am met on all sides with love, never judgement. This is faith on my own terms—not the faith passed to me by my family, not the faith hawked by the religious communities of my childhood. Coming to this church felt like coming home.

Faith is not necessarily safe and comfortable. My family remains unaware that I have struggled to carry their faith legacy. There are things they would not accept about my beliefs, but I have hope that one day I will get better at sharing, and they will listen. But I have finally begun to see that long-awaited spiritual transformation in myself, and it surprised me when I least expected it. It did not come when I was at my “holiest,” in what I believed a holy land, attending chapel and youth groups and Sunday morning church while watching apologetics debates in my free time and living in a way that most would have identified as Christian. Instead, it showed up in messy places. One night, I sat in my parked car passing tissues to a friend as she cried because sometimes faith is just *hard*, and I confessed that I had nearly left it all behind.

She turned wide eyes to me. “Oh,” she said. “*Oh.*” It was like some weight was lifted from her too, like she realized nobody actually had it together in this thing, and that was okay. What I never would have confessed years before—what would have viewed as my moment of deepest shame if I had held onto the Christian fundamentalist ideals of the subculture I was raised in—became one of the greatest pieces of evidence I have that these hard things are worth it. Faith may never be something I hold securely with tight fists, but perhaps that is not the way it

is intended to be. Rather, it is something I approach with open hands, something poured out from a father who has a thing for wayward pilgrims who just might be finding their way home at last.

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