

The image features a circular logo in the upper right quadrant. The logo is black with the word 'LAMP' in a large, gold, serif font. Below it, the text 'FALL 2009 ISSUE I' is written in a smaller, gold, sans-serif font. The background of the entire image is a dense forest of tall, thin trees with a warm, golden-brown color palette. Numerous autumn leaves in shades of yellow, orange, and brown are scattered throughout, with a thick layer of leaves framing the top and bottom edges of the image.

# LAMP

FALL 2009 ISSUE I

LAMP is a literary magazine which publishes creative pieces and critical essays written by current students and alumni of Liberty University; the views expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the LAMP staff or Liberty University. LAMP aspires to stimulate readers both within and outside the University with the creativity and critical work of its contributors.



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## Letter from the General Editor:

I had only a miniscule notion of what I was committing to when I met with a small group of exemplary individuals—those who became invaluable editorial staff members—to verbally mold the literary magazine now known as LAMP and the volumes, such as this one which you currently possess, that would soon stem from that luminous name. The nature of that commitment materialized in the compact form of two saddle-stitched volumes. I discovered that I'd committed to working with some of the finest and most articulate students, and to offering an outlet for them to disseminate their meditations beyond the dull white walls of campus classrooms in which their ideas are all too often confined. Not a bad thing to commit to, if I may say so.

As Stanley Kunitz was not done with his changes, so I am not done with my discoveries. One of the ideas agreed upon from that conceptual meeting was to publish four issues of LAMP each academic year: two in the fall semester, and two in the spring. The inevitable difficulties of doubling the number of publications per academic year will resolve themselves accordingly. What I look forward to most of all is doubling the number of these fine voices amplified beyond the classroom. I invite you to listen to these voices which I have listened to; be challenged, delighted, offended and encouraged by them.

One of the most important things Samuel Beckett has reminded me of through his plays is our inherent need to hear the voice of others to appease our loneliness. In *Ghost Trio*, the unnamed character designated as *F* is utterly isolated from conversation; even the mysterious hooded boy who appears in the saturnine corridor says nothing but merely ebbs beyond sight, shaded by darkness. *F* resumes his seat, anxious for the sound of something or, more appropriately, someone to break the silence. Fortunately, the pages bound in this volume of LAMP and those forthcoming in the additional issues are a welcomed audible disruption of the lonely silence (or is it the silent loneliness—or both?) we know better than most of us care to acknowledge. Days in which we hear refined voices addressing us are happy—or happier—days.



Ryan Knight  
*LAMP* General Editor  
September 2009



Untitled  
Sara Hoffmann

# Why so Serious, Misfit?: A Consideration of Comfortable Nihilism

Nick Olson



Only one year removed from *The Dark Knight's* summer 2008 blockbuster release, I recently listened to a couple of entertainment commentators assert that the latest adaptation of the caped crusader comics could be considered this decade's defining film – high praise for a summer comic book flick. Yet it is not without warrant: the film boasts extraordinary sales, excellent direction from Christopher Nolan, and 2 hours and 45 minutes in which to consider some of modern society's philosophical and moral conundrums to boot. Yet most critics agree that the film's defining feature is the dazzling performance the late Heath Ledger gives audiences as the Joker. Many critics and fans have proclaimed Ledger's enactment of the Joker as one of the greatest villains ever depicted on film. While Ledger's performance is legendary, I cannot help but consider Flannery O'Connor's Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" because his musing as a nihilist emanates a more accurate vision of reality. O'Connor's treatment of the nihilistic antagonist is notably different from Nolan's in ways that connote opposing notions of freedom, evil, and human nature; this subtle difference forces one to consider the goodness of human nature, man's inclination toward goodness, and whether man has the autonomous freedom to choose goodness.

Considering it is part of the superhero genre, the acclaim Nolan's film and its Academy Award winning villain have received may make some wonder: "Why so serious?" Ledger's Joker is a maniacal and homicidal nihilist; from his "magic trick" with a pencil to his bombing of a local hospital, he terrorizes the citizens of Gotham City. Yet the basis for the Joker's evil is perhaps the reason he is such a frightening antagonist: he believes in nothing. He fits the description Batman's butler, Alfred, gives for the nihilist villain: "Some men . . . can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or

negotiated with. [They] just want to watch the world burn." The Joker steals the mob's money and then makes them watch as he sets millions of dollars of it on fire – then he kills them. He gives a different explanation to his victims for the scars on the sides of his lips that form a permanent smile – thus eliminating any reasonably psychological explanation to make us feel better about his chaos. However, Nolan's nihilistic villain is much more than a stereotypical bad guy; he rightly recognizes his evil nature in others.

Nolan's nihilistic Joker is in fact a bit of a muse who makes some truthful claims about the state of civilized humanity and modern society. He is hell-bent on exposing the fact that people act morally upright only because society defines morality and persuades obedience to its definition. In one of the most memorable scenes of the film, the jailed Joker confronts an irate Batman regarding the people of Gotham and their supposed morals: "Their morals, their code, it's a bad joke...they're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show ya - when the chips are down, these . . . civilized people – they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster – I'm just ahead of the curve." The Joker sets out to prove he is right about humanity by placing the people of Gotham City in extreme moral traps that would make Jigsaw from *Saw* blush. Essentially the Joker rants that, deep down, everyone is just like him; if the civilized people of Gotham were not slaves to their society's control, then they too would be free to allow human nature to wreak havoc. Yet in one of the film's climactic scenes, the people of Gotham – even its criminals – do what is morally right in the face of one of the Joker's moral tests. Nolan presents a dichotomy between "good people" and an evil, nihilistic killer, and he ultimately intimates that human nature is inclined toward goodness – not toward evil. Thus, his conclusion, while sentimental, feels more incomplete than true.

Though Nolan affirms the reality of right and wrong – and even that human nature includes a moral conscience – he overstates human nature's willingness and desire to choose goodness. That is, Nolan seems to contend that people are more like Harvey Dent than Two-Face. This is why, when watching Ledger's Joker interacting with civilized moderns, Flannery O'Connor's nihilist Misfit and his encounter with the Grandmother in the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" immediately comes to mind. As disturbing as Ledger's portrayal of the Joker is, so too is O'Connor's Misfit just as twisted. A philosophically-minded friend of mine commented that, after reading the conclusion to O'Connor's short story, he felt unsettled to the point of

However, Nolan's nihilistic villain is much more than a stereotypical bad guy; he rightly recognizes his evil nature in others.



not wanting to read the story again. O'Connor's villain displays his nihilistic stance, but – also functioning as a bit of a muse – reveals quite a different dichotomy than Nolan's good people versus evil nihilist:

Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.

The Misfit makes these remarks to the Grandmother whom O'Connor has portrayed throughout the story as a selfish, self-righteous Christian who believes she is a good

person. But she is a good country woman in the same vein that Gotham City is full of morally upright people; she is a child first and foremost of Southern, Bible-belt culture – not God. Yet as the Misfit is killing the Grandmother's family, and just before he shoots her three times in the chest, the Grandmother seems to have a cathartic moment and proclaims to the Misfit, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" While O'Connor's short story and the meaning of its ending have been endlessly debated, one sensible interpretation is that the Grandmother comes to realize that she is no better than the Misfit; they are of the same family, and the natures of the two are one and the same: inclined toward rebellion against Christ.

In his nihilism, the Joker relishes the fact that he is even more radically free than the socially-bound people of Gotham City. There seems to be some truth to what the Joker claims regarding Gotham's citizens: without civilized, modern society influencing citizens' choices, immorality would likely be more prevalent – or at

least more overtly active. Choosing to obey the law – not out of a transformed genuine desire to live righteously, but out of a socially-instilled sense of obligation – is neither genuine freedom nor morality. Misguided notions of freedom and morality remind one of a profound statement from the

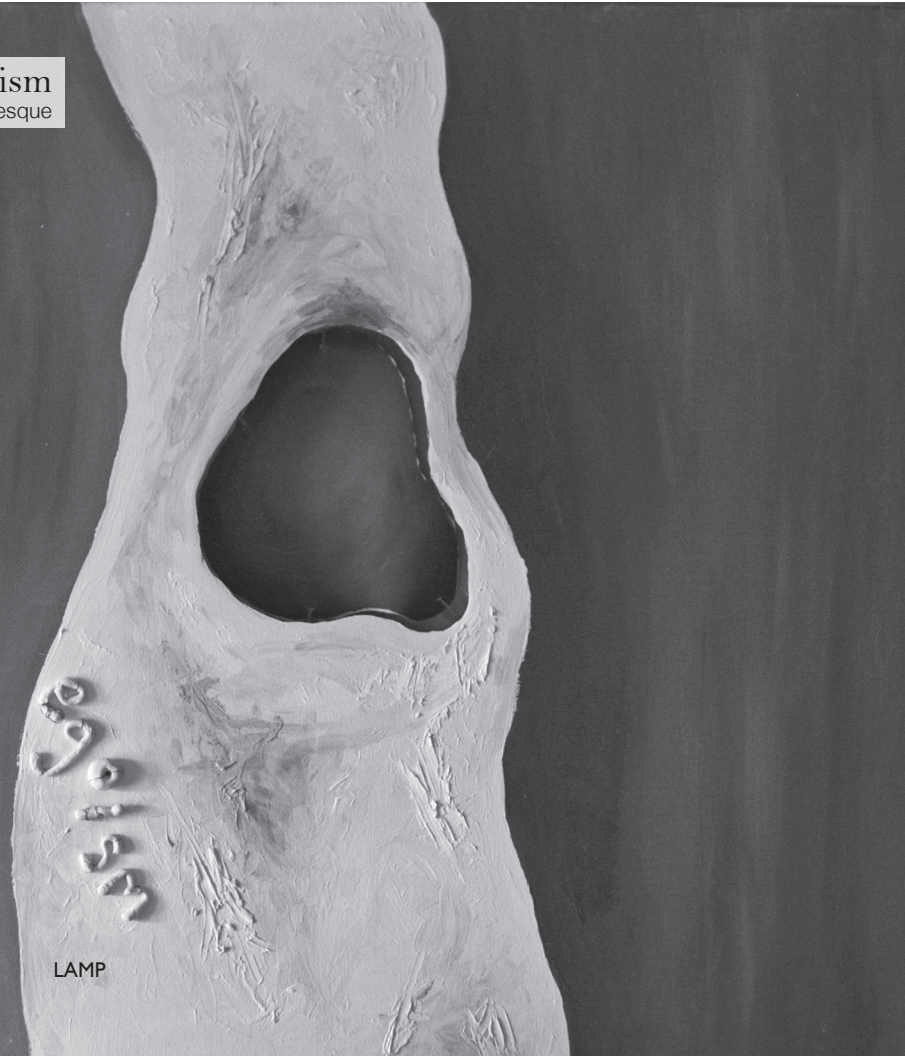
Choosing to obey the law – not out of a transformed genuine desire to live righteously, but out of a socially-instilled sense of obligation – is neither genuine freedom nor morality.

philosophical father of modern society G.W.F. Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*: "If we hear it said that the definition of freedom is [the] ability to do what we please, such an idea can only be taken to reveal an utter immaturity of thought, for it contains not even an inkling of the absolutely free will, of right, ethical life, and so forth." In light of Hegel's thoughts on freedom, the Joker's character is wise enough to recognize his own nothingness in Gotham's people, but evil enough to believe in – and boast over – precisely what mutually enslaves both himself and the people of Gotham toward disintegration: the idea that the individual's freedom to choose is the highest good.

While the Joker and the Misfit seem to be one and the same as nihilists musing about similar conceptions of "good citizens" produced by modern civilized society, Nolan and O'Connor seem to have different reactions to the essence of the conflict between modern notions of freedom and morality. To Nolan, the people of Gotham are good when compared to villains like the Joker; even when seemingly cut free from some of the societal structures that the Joker alludes to as inhibitors of autonomous

## Egoism

Kelly Levesque



freedom, people will still do what is right because they are inherently good. However, O'Connor envisions the situation in a radically different way: in comparison to Christ, the nihilist Misfit and the cultural Christian Grandmother are both fallen short of a holy standard. And the presence of a governmentally—or socially—enforced law in nearly any historical civilization seems to confirm O'Connor's intimation that we all will more readily choose immorality. Hence, the problem with the modern's love affair with autonomy: if given the choice, he will selfishly choose destruction, disintegration, and, ultimately, nothingness.

Freedom is neither the ability to make choices nor to make them in a self-contained vacuum free from persuasion – which is not even possible. An apt summation of the autonomous modern's dilemma is lucidly stated by David B. Hart in his article "Christ and Nothing":

We live in an age whose chief moral value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the absolute liberty of personal volition. . . . The will, we believe, is sovereign because unpromised, free because spontaneous, and this is the highest good. And a society that believes this must, at least implicitly, embrace and subtly advocate a very particular moral metaphysics: the unreality of any "value" higher than choice, or of any transcendent Good ordering desire towards a higher end. Desire is free to propose, seize, accept or reject, want or not want — but not to obey.

Whether deceived regarding the goodness of human nature by the civilized nature of modern society – or supposedly free from the shackles of civility to do Satan's bidding more explicitly and discreetly, we are all slaves. What O'Connor's nihilist muse – as well as O'Connor herself – recognizes is that ultimately one is either a slave to evil or a slave to Christ. The paradoxical nature of Christianity is that slaves to Christ and His righteousness inhabit true freedom – the freedom to know what is right, wrong, and how to live accordingly in incomparable joy. The Christian is able to reject modern man's autonomous notion of freedom because he recognizes that he is a creation who is thankfully enslaved to his gracious and loving Creator. Yet, when Christians are pressed in an engagement with the sinfulness of secular society, we would do well to maintain a humble stance by remembering that our human nature is not "good" or better in comparison – nor are we naturally inclined to choose righteousness; we are just as evil, and without Christ's redeeming love that we have been given – and secular moderns sorely need to be counted truly righteous – we would all be misfits unfit to inhabit Christ's kingdom. †

## Worship Me

Brittiany Godby



Lace on island dreams:  
clouds drifting, drowning sun isles—  
cavernous wheels afloat,  
ambulant, and not desperate, just ambient  
and advocating peace. Peace drifts,  
peace drifts. Drown, me, drown, me,  
he screams, sitting in the sun by his daughter  
not himself with blood on the tips of  
his fingers now. Sing, peace be gone,  
sun be here like knives on his skin he says  
to me, only me, because I'm the pick o' the town,  
a Jack O Lant' at night  
drifting in away into knighted night with eyes aglo',  
with mouth aglow,  
with ears  
silenced by orange wax—  
orange wax of a bean stock hair growth  
and a prick of a twist on top, too.  
Drift away, drift away in the sun,  
he cries. O, he cries. "Worship, me,  
worship me."



Untitled  
Ben Taylor

## No Time to Whimper

Tim Mattingly

*Tim Mattingly*

“This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.”  
-T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

How long till tick becomes tock,  
All hands midnight-boarding?  
When jaws that jut and strut  
Wire shut without warning,  
When mere mortal hopes char  
And eyes pried ajar dash upon their lids,  
When our rattling bodies quake  
Til teeth like trumpets break:  
A symphony blaring the end, the end.

Our weak sealed lips will not part  
As we swallow all the shards.  
A final clicking of clocks  
Which wind their course in circles,  
Finding an end where they'd begun —  
In a flash of light, it all is done.





Small Swirls  
Morgaine Godwin

## Coming Storm

Angelica Atkins

*Qeen*

Summer heat presses down and the home-come farmer sighs,  
watching fireflies outside taunt the flickering, broody sky.  
The end of fruitless day finds him kneeling at his hearth,  
calloused hands clasped,  
his hope, Heaven, but only dirt is within grasp.  
He begs an angelic audience,  
with the rocks, he prays  
that rain would quench earth's mouth, no longer cracked and dry,  
that Adam's curse be forgotten, fields and furrows satisfied,  
that God would give answer to a simple man's prayer,  
that his back be unbroken, his table not bare.  
Night settles like dust and drags him down to sleep,  
the rest of one weary is dreamless and deep.  
His eyes are dead to the lightning  
cutting like a knife,  
breaking the water of Heaven  
which makes way for the birth of life.



# The Inn of the Three Rejected Brothers

Tess Stockslager



Whenever Esau comes to this diner, he sits at the end of the counter. Esau is a broad man with an explosion of tangled hair and the glum expression seen in every middle school picture of the kind of longsuffering miserable kid who will grow up to be a comedian. And whenever Esau comes to this diner he orders stew, and he cries. Part of the reason he cries is that he loves stew so much. People who do not really take the time to love their food cannot understand how lentils, leeks, goat cheese and venison can give Esau a beatific thrill much like seeing angels climbing up and down a heavenly ladder. But the other reason he cries is that every time he eats stew he remembers, like penance, his painful history involving stew.

He remembers coming home from a day of rambling through the fields and tearing through the acacia groves. All day he had been thinking about the road that led away from his family's tents, where his mother ignored him, his brother quietly mocked him, and his father loved him as a sportsman but not as a son. Esau could not stop thinking about the road, and how he could leave everything behind if he were not the oldest son.

When he got home that night and entered his tent, there was Jacob, all slim and clean, with his straight black hair like his mother's falling into his eye, and holding an enormous bowl of stew. Esau smelled the stew and felt his knees buckle a little,

and he sighed from way down in his belly.

"Esau," Jacob said, "I know you want some stew."

"Please, Jacob," Esau said, and lowered himself onto a pile of blankets, feeling the ground turn sideways and his emotions start slipping out of his control.

"Esau," Jacob said, "I will give you all this stew if you let me be the older brother." Esau looked helplessly at Jacob, confused by weariness and hunger and savory smells. "I mean permanently," Jacob said. "Legally, you sell me your birthright for this bowl of stew. It's a big bowl of stew."

"I'm not a moron, Jacob," Esau groaned with his face in his hands.

"I know you're not," Jacob said. "But you're so impatient. You have no self-control." Jacob set the bowl in front of Esau. "Come on now, brother. Enjoy your stew."

And Esau ate, and for the first time in his life, he cried into his stew.

Esau usually eats two bowls of stew at the diner, one for Jacob and one for himself. By the time he gets to the second, he is thinking about the worst day of his life, the day his father didn't recognize him. He had made a bowl of stew for his father entirely with his own hands, from gutting the warm body of the deer to crumbling the spices. It was a perfect bowl of stew. And when Esau gave it to his father and knelt down to hear the powerful old words about the soil and the rain and blessing and cursing, instead he heard fear, confusion, outrage. And he thought he heard Jacob's voice, persuading like always. Once again, Esau cried like a little boy—in front of Jacob, his father and mother, and the man who dressed and fed his father because he was too old to see.

One day the waitress sees Esau staring with wet eyes at the counter, his hand over his mouth. She doesn't take his half-eaten bowl of stew, because she knows him and knows he will finish it. Just then, the door opens and in walks one of Jacob's twelve sons, Issachar. Issachar looks more like his uncle Esau than like his father Jacob—stocky with out-of-control hair, though Issachar's isn't gray yet. Issachar sits down on a stool next to Esau and orders a bowl of stew and a glass of milk.

Esau grabs two fistfuls of his gray curly hair, as if a swift upward jerk could pull him from his reverie. He shivers slightly and asks Issachar, "How are the sheep?"

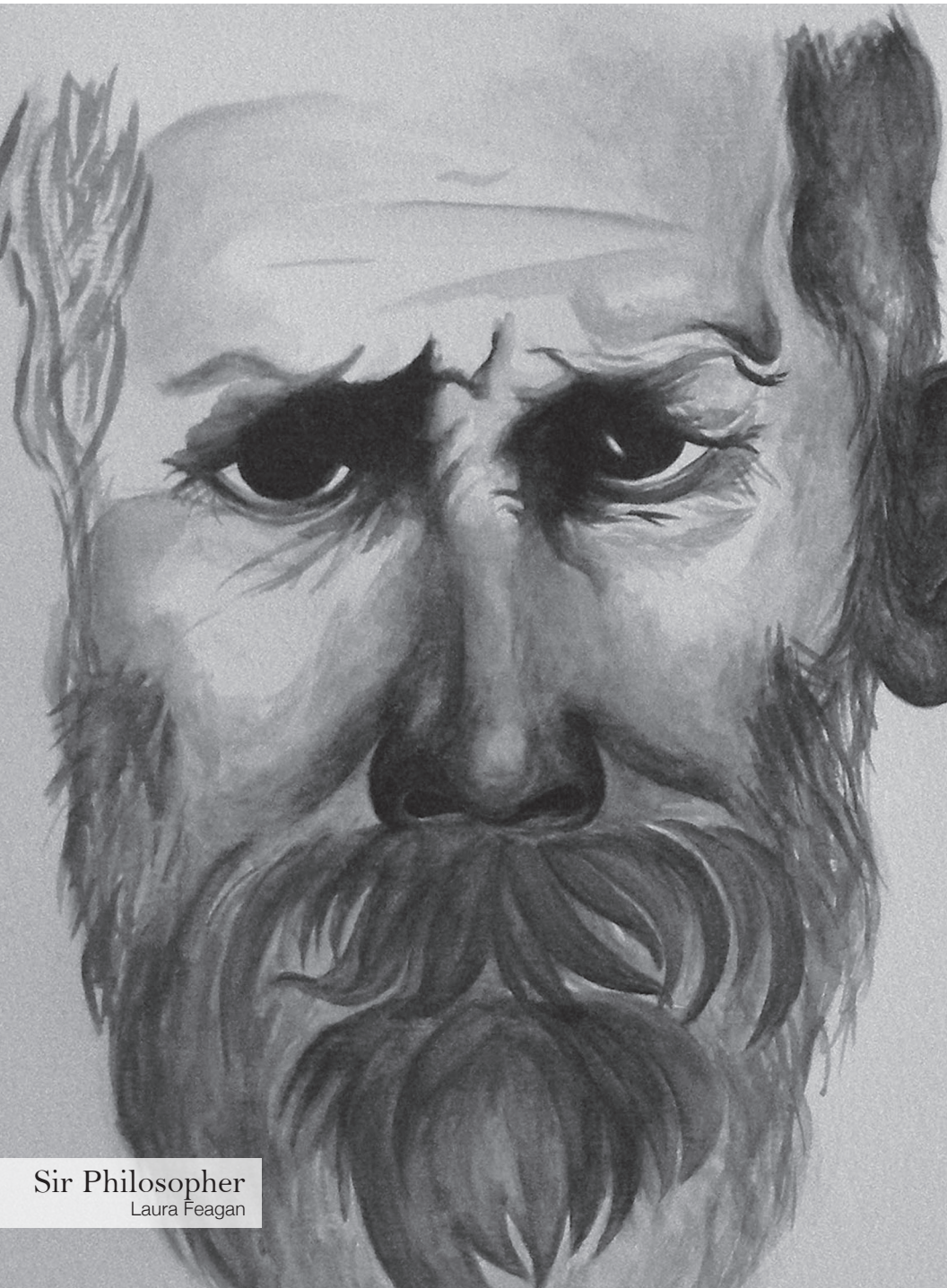
"Fat," says Issachar.

"And how is your father?"

"I think he's going senile," Issachar replies into his glass of milk, giving his words a dull sound.

"Oh?" said Esau, returning to his stew. "How can you tell?"

"He gave Joseph a coat. You know how when people get old and crazy, they start to give people things? Well, he gave Joseph this coat. And it's not just any old



Sir Philosopher  
Laura Feagan

everyday brown coat. It's a coat of many colors. And it's totally useless, but it's amazing. Like Technicolor."

"It sounds nice," mumbles Esau with a piece of venison in his mouth.

"Well, and I think my father is re-enacting his youth or something," Issachar says. "He always used to say, 'My father didn't like me; he liked Esau because he was rugged.' He acted like it was so wrong to have a favorite son. And now, he has a favorite son."

Issachar has finished his milk and is concentrating seriously on swirling the glass back and forth. "Joseph is spacey. And annoying. Listen to this story; we were out in the pasture one day last week, all of us brothers, taking a break, and Joseph said we should all tell what dreams we had the night before. I thought it was weird, but whatever; I said I'd dreamed about breakfast, which was true, and Simeon said had dreamed about this gorgeous girl who comes to deliver eggs every morning, which I'm sure was also true, knowing Simeon. And on down, we'd all dreamed about stuff that normal people dream about." Issachar clears his throat and looks over at Esau to see if he is listening. It is hard to tell; he is busy eating, bent over his bowl. "But Joseph told us this dream about how he was in the field, and he saw these eleven frayed, rotten sheaves of corn. Eleven, you hear? Like all of his brothers."

Esau makes a sound that indicated he is listening while eating.

"So the eleven ugly sheaves all turned and bowed down to this perfect sheaf, which of course was Joseph's." Issachar scratches his head with both hands in frustration. "After he told us this, I was waiting for him to start laughing; I think everybody was. But he didn't laugh; he just sat there beaming like a moron. I wanted to smack his obnoxious little face."

"Well," Esau says, "You have to remember that Joseph's just a kid."

Issachar pushes away his glass and crosses his arms. "I hate him."

The door slams open and an ominous cloud of dust blows in, followed by a man with ragged clothes, long curly hair, and bare feet.

"It's a hippie," says the waitress, who is refilling Issachar's glass.

"It's the Wandering Jew," says Issachar, in a hushed tone.

"No," says Esau, "it's Cain."

"I am the Wandering Jew," declares the ragged man in the voice of one who makes an occupation of oratory. "And I am Cain," he says in a quieter voice.

It is definitely Cain, and whether or not he truly is the Wandering Jew, this is the role he plays. Now the Wandering Jew, like the Ancient Mariner, can fascinate people with his eye and force them to hear his lugubrious tale. He quickly sizes up his small audience and then squints up one eye like a pirate. "I will tell you my story," he intones.

“Okay,” say the uncle and the nephew, and Esau puts down his spoon in the bowl. Cain twists his face into a horrible grimace and says in a hollow, perfectly rehearsed ghost-story voice, “I . . . killed . . . my . . . brother.”

The revelation does not have its intended effect. Esau appears entirely unmoved and goes back to his stew. Issachar looks slightly troubled but not shocked. Cain pauses, thinking the horrifying disclosure might take a moment to sink in.

Then Esau says, “I tried to kill my brother.”

Issachar says, “I want to kill my brother.”

Cain looks from one resigned face to the other. He decides to give up on Esau and concentrate on Issachar. He tones down his pirate face and says, “I have a message for you, young man.”

“Okay,” says Issachar, looking a little doubtful.

Given this cue, the Wandering Jew takes several steps backward, spreads out his arms, lifts his wind-eroded face toward the ceiling, and thunders, “DO NOT KILL YOUR BROTHER.”

Instead of clasp his hands or falling from his stool in fear and repentance, Issachar simply asks, “Why?”

Cain is baffled. His fascinating eye must be losing its power. And so he

decides to drop his act. He starts afresh in a new voice, that of a straight-shooting advice guru: “First of all, don’t you know that it’s wrong to kill?” But the prophetic voice is an old habit, easy to sink back into. “Hath not the LORD said that whoever sheds man’s blood shall be brought to justice?”

Issachar, who does not know what a rhetorical question is, says, “Yes, He hath.” “And secondly,” says Cain, “trying to kill your brother won’t do you any good. Look around you and behold the results of fratricide, accomplished or attempted.” He makes a sweeping gesture including everyone present. The bulb in the dirty orange frosted-glass light fixture hanging above his head suddenly blows out.

“I’ve never tried to kill my brother,” says the waitress, pouring Issachar some more milk.

“I exempt this woman from the illustration,” sighs Cain. “But do you want to end up like me, doomed to go around haunting people for the rest of an indefinitely long life? Or like this man, who sits around in a puddle of regrets and uses food as a mood-altering substance?”

Esau inhales a lentil and coughs into his napkin. When he is finished, his eyes are wet again, but he keeps eating.

Cain pulls out a stool next to Issachar and climbs onto it. “Listen,” he says, “your brother has been chosen by God.”


“How do you know?” Issachar asks.

“Because the ones who are chosen by God are always the ones we want to kill. Ask your uncle.”

Issachar glances quickly at Esau, who is staring into his stew, and then looks back at Cain. “But why?” he asks, childishly.

“That’s a dumb question, shepherd boy,” Cain says, without any derision. “You know the answer. It’s because we wish God had chosen us.” And Cain orders a bowl of stew, and the conversation is over. But Issachar wonders whether he should believe Cain. Cain wonders, too, whether he should believe himself.

Since the Wandering Jew, by definition, cannot stay in any one place for very long, Cain has to get a to-go Styrofoam cup with “Have a Nice Day” printed in red, although “Nice” has been crossed out with a purple marker. After Cain leaves, Issachar decides to leave too. As he walks home, he thinks he should probably tell his brothers about what has just passed, but he doesn’t want them to think he is a dreamer, so he decides to keep it to himself.

And Esau takes a deep breath and orders another bowl of stew. 

Issachar wonders whether he should believe Cain. Cain wonders, too, whether he should believe himself.





Untitled  
Lauren Bell

## Help Wanted

Joe Dickinson

*Joe*

gnarled and lumpy  
the gray-haired soup lady  
slumps over the stove  
stirring sloshing splattering  
watching the day old soup  
slither down the sides of pots  
as she swirls it around around  
with her flimsy ivory soup ladle,  
rubbery like her brown  
sun-baked and wrinkled skin.  
“anybody got a Newport?!”  
she’d yell in her thick New York accent  
and step outside to smoke by the dumpster.  
“see ya tomara”  
the words would fall out of her mouth  
like a polluted cloud in the winter air.  
everyone moved on eventually  
and they replaced her.  
it’s not like the soup  
was that good in the first place.

## A Worn Note

Alexandra Barylski



A worn note from a past love  
emerges from the womb  
of a winter's coat pocket,  
interrupting years of silence—

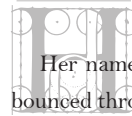
the unfurling white blossom  
of penciled loose-leaf paper  
was hastily snatched  
from a pair of black-gloved hands  
by currents of wet wind,  
rushing people, loose garbage,  
poking pigeons, terra-cotta leaves—

impish Fate purloined  
a hand-written message worth  
only the memory of its promise:

brimming words and small tokens  
of affection, which had been read  
and re-read during coffee breaks,  
now skip frantically down the sidewalk  
like an abandoned playbill  
from last week's matinee.

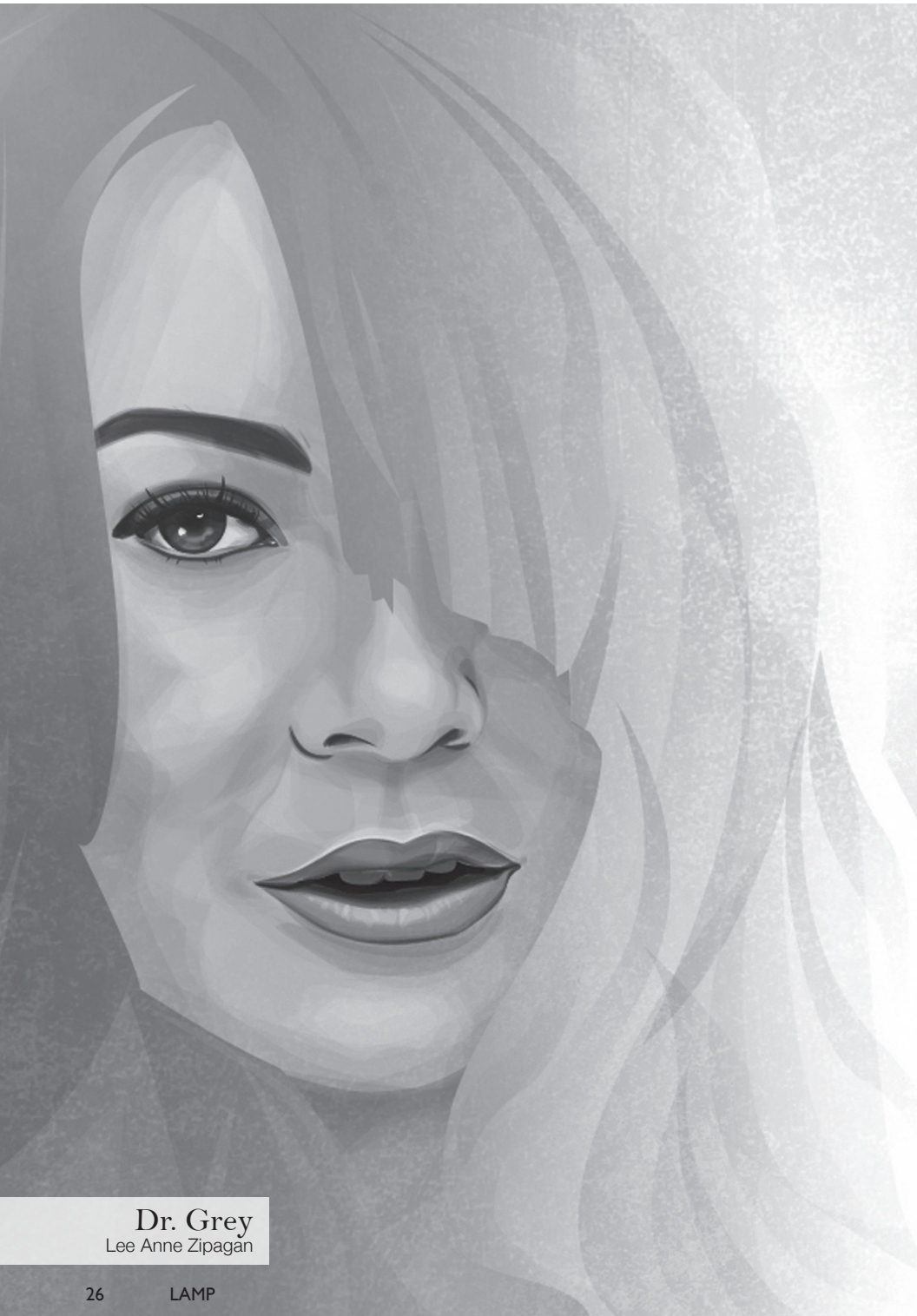
## Tomorrow

Ryan Masters



Her name was Jessie and every week she dyed her hair. Over Chinese food, she bounced through her personal history, from early seclusion in Ireland (“my mom was super protective”), to her stolen hours with her friends and among the knackers, a sort of violent Irish gypsy group (“one of them murdered our old neighbor yesterday”), her short year of sudden independence in South Africa (“they would rob you in your car, broad daylight, at stoplights that you eventually learned to run”), a brief attempt at art school in Atlanta, and the mistake that dragged her to Lynchburg. “I would rather not talk about it, but let’s just say, he has issues.” Now she worked as a janitor and hated it and was taking classes in cosmetology school and loved it and eventually she would try art again and take another trip overseas and then maybe settle down. Eventually.

I seriously considered leaving the country once. In the process I half-learned Spanish, practicing grammar on my Mexican coworkers and watching novelas on television. But a year or so of procrastination left me with a handful of semi-useful phrases like “Pass me the tomatoes, please,” and “Why did you do this to me, Maria?” yet no experience abroad whatsoever. The classic under-achiever, I was awarded my



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GED consolation prize after dropping out of high school. And after taking a deep one-and-a-half year yawn in between undergrad and grad, I was inches away from falling off the reach-your-potential ladder again and hoping the ground was still where I left it.

She wore almost too much makeup. She loved color, as she explained it, and those things she loved she flailed after. I felt grey; whatever I was wearing was almost certainly a hand-me-down from my suburban, middle-class plastic family in North Carolina. I reacted to her with bothered interest, squirming in my step-father's old golf shirt, occasionally emitting some *wows*, a lot of *hmphs* and *ohs*. Before, during and after every story her cell phone would announce a text; she was like a live-feed blog, a stream-of-consciousness Twitter, her mouth talking and her fingers typing, her mind wondering and her heart wandering. I watched her and scratched my forehead, a wavy, overwhelmed smile taped to my face.

We were both in a "Lynchburg funk," as we agreed to call it, a fact that perhaps led to our affinity for one another. Lynchburg was caught up in her spokes; hope taunted her and rushed off elsewhere, a vague but definite elsewhere. But to me, that little Bible-belt town was as good as any other; it was my country-wife, cheerful but severe and smelling constantly of soup and spices. I was committed to *Lynchburg*, and something beautiful was bound to grow out of that. However, looking through the dusty window of the Chinese restaurant and into the vacant, evening Main Street, I wondered what that *something* was. At twenty-five, I was stuck between the vague desire to "see the world," collecting experiences like little novelty trinkets along my way, and seriously settling into the ground beneath my feet for once. The clumsy twenty-something blues were a-marchin' along—*somewhere*, I had to believe.

I read Yeats to her, the only thing I knew related to Ireland, and asked her to illustrate a children's book I had not even written in my head yet. I felt a sort of nervous urgency around her; the burning ambition I never thought I had finally found a comet scurrying rapidly through the sky. When I looked into her eyes, I could see the frantic flashing of clocks blinking red twelves. Time was taunting me, challenging me—*when will you get where you're going?*

So I silenced Time with her at Little Dickens' bookstore. He quieted awhile as she shouted. "Oh, I remember this one! You read it?"

The book loudly illustrated a mother's children being turned into food by a witch disguised as a beggar. Jessie's eyes glittered like fireflies, blue-green brightening little black bodies in the middle, always moving, occasionally flashing. Her skin had a slight tan tint and matched the soft cottage in the picture, where boys and girls were transformed into several tasty courses.



“Let’s go to *Tibet*,” she said, suddenly. Her eyes darted across her cheeks like wolves screaming down a steep hillside. “Ever been?”

Laughing, I said no and asked what she cared about Tibet anyway from her little corner of Lynchburg. “There are beautiful things here, you know?”

She sighed. “Whatever. I hate Lynchburg. I clean toilets in Lynchburg.”

“They have toilets in Tibet, too, I think.” She rolled her eyes and pushed me, just enough to confirm that she was still here, with me at a Lynchburg bookstore on a sleepy, modest afternoon, and not entirely in Tibet.

She ran ahead of Time, steady as it marched, as I was crawling behind. While she struggled to stay patient with the steady rolling of minutes, hours, days, weeks, I sighed and stared as they passed. I was an observer, an admirer, of the days—I wrote about them and talked about them, sipped coffee in them and slept in them, tried to remember them. But she was a thief, breaking in on Time in its sleep and stealing extra hours she needed to keep life moving.

She tossed her burgundy-gold hair and looked at me. “Ryan, I like you, but you should be more spontaneous.”

Later we were on her patio, four floors above Grace Street. Barefoot children danced in a drug-house yard across from us as the moon’s eyes lit the cracks in the concrete. A single tree shrugged at the hungry, confused people slouching by. Against the black sky, her face became an endless sky, her cheeks half-moons and eyes like blue stars. Her dress painted fluorescent streaks on the dark background, like fire spreading over the night. She was a foreign world I was striving toward: burning satellites whirling around some vaguely defined sun. The fire filled my eyes now. If I had known the zeal needed to pursue such a star I would have stayed out in the tedious streets and wept and fasted, wept and prayed. But I am no prophet. So I followed her—chased her—up the stairs, onto her patio under the anesthetized sky.

And there the drugged moon silenced and blackened burning Time as Jessie stopped suddenly and turned. As a quiet night bird perched in the dark leaves of the solitary tree, we kissed. Swept up into her, it seemed both morning and evening, Time doubling over in a fit. The children danced as the junkies watched them with sad eyes through a smoky window, a pipe full of their dreams still burning. And upstairs, we smelled the street and dreamt. Our lips still moved, hers slowing gradually as sleepy repose closed her eyes, mine wandering madly, helplessly from top lip to bottom as my eyes flashed with aimless courage. I wanted to be spontaneous, assertive, brave to the point of recklessness. But the spinning, the burning, the whiplash dizziness—where was I to steady myself?

“I’m not sure what to say now. Where do we go from here?” I asked as I pulled away and watched her eyes reopen.

“Let’s start with dinner,” she replied. “Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, no longer creeping but crouching, trapped in an uncertain pause amidst its petty pace and staring into the fire tearing across the sky. And when the sun breaks the night over our heads and tomorrow comes tumbling down to douse the flames, what will remain? After all, what do we know about tomorrow, except that it occasionally allows us to touch the hem of its garment? Lingering too long on the patio between the ground and the sky, between time sprinting and time seizing, it seemed we could at any moment be thrown in either direction. We met between the romantic randomness of Tibet and

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the grueling familiarity of Lynchburg. We were bound to tear away from each other, and toward our old extremes.

But still her eyes stopped on their way across the universe to meet mine, slow and damp like a wet field, and filled me with the sense of the divine in her. Her hair is already a different color, now burning like the sun’s core, and when

she brushes it across her shoulders it is like the fall of volcanic ash, and I’m trapped in the mist, the thick, choking air of the Spirit of God animating her lips as I hear her say, in a whisper now, and at the cadence of her slowing heart-beat: “I would... really like to have dinner... with you. Tomorrow. Stop by tomorrow.”

But tomorrow slides by like a devious and graceful matador.

A few days come and go, and she decides the hours are just not there for us. She walks her dog a few steps ahead of me as she tells me, letting her words catch the air and brush into me on their way back, that she’s sorry—she just doesn’t have that sort of time. Later I will read of Edna St. Vincent Millay remembering her “unremembered lads” that come to her like “ghosts” drifting on the tragic wind of impermanence that peels our fingers one by one from the kisses that came too fast, too soon:

Thus in the winter stands a lonely tree,  
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,  
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:  
I cannot say what loves have come and gone;

I only know that summer sang in me

A little while, that in me sings no more.

But for now the little bird is still there. She is preparing herself for flight.

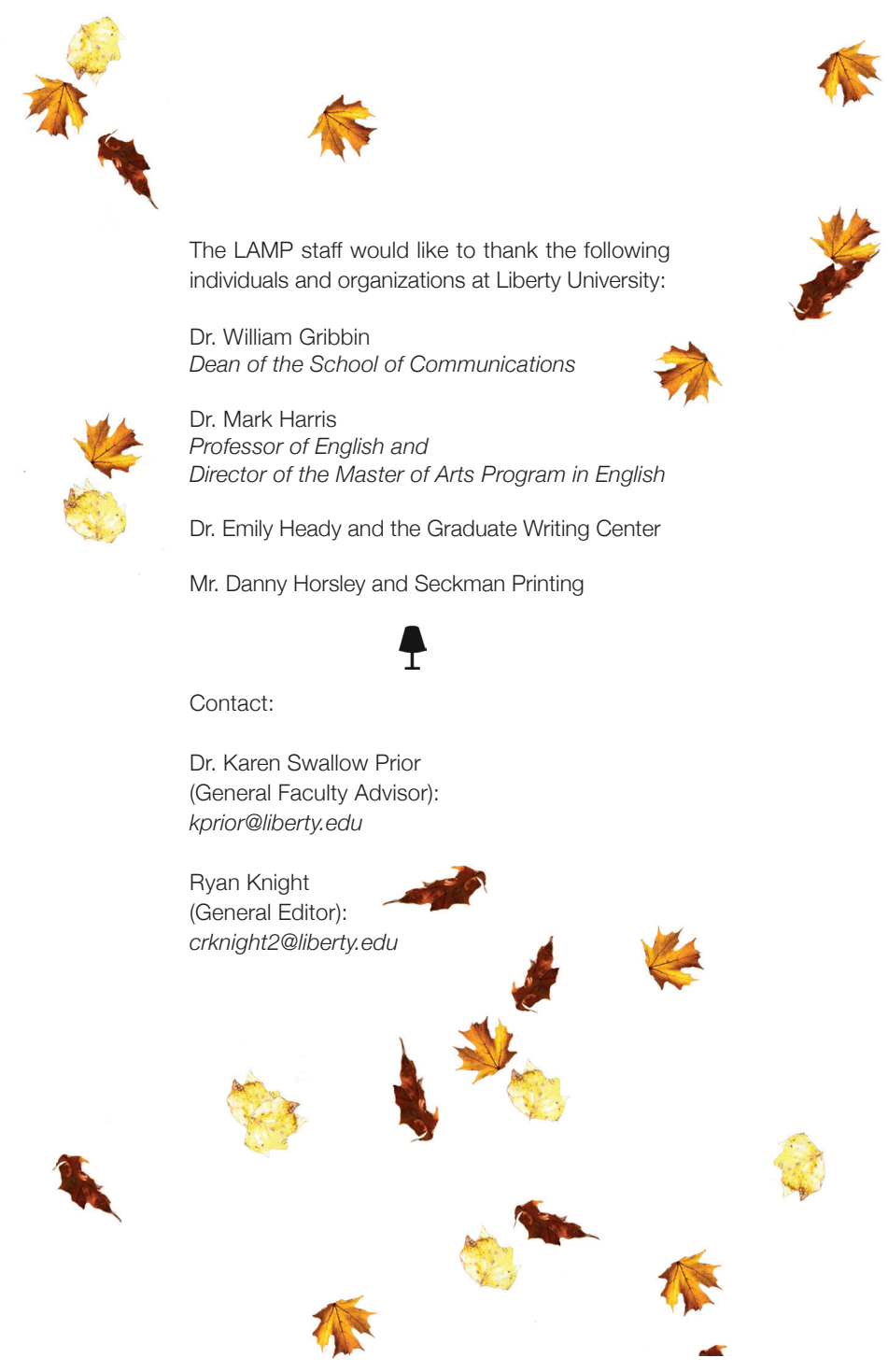
“But, Ryan?”

“Yeah, Jess?”

She was facing me at the end of the walk, one last time before we were tossed back into our places. “We were clumsy, but it wasn’t all bad, right?” she said as I knelt slowly toward her restless, wriggling dog.

As I rubbed the dog’s ears I considered all of the things overhead, unchanged by our hastiness: the sleeping cars, the cool grey sky with its calm moon, the little night bird mysteriously taking shelter in the lonely tree. The world still spun in its steady way, unraveling history like a great rug before us to our common destiny. We forgot the listening ear of patience, but the world remembered. Like children with crushes, each of us coalesced to the other’s awkward way of walking and held hands, giggled and blushed until the Eternal Teacher called us away again.

I smiled and agreed: *there was some good in it*. And when I looked up I watched her rush into the house, flying frantically toward her endless tomorrows. 🕯



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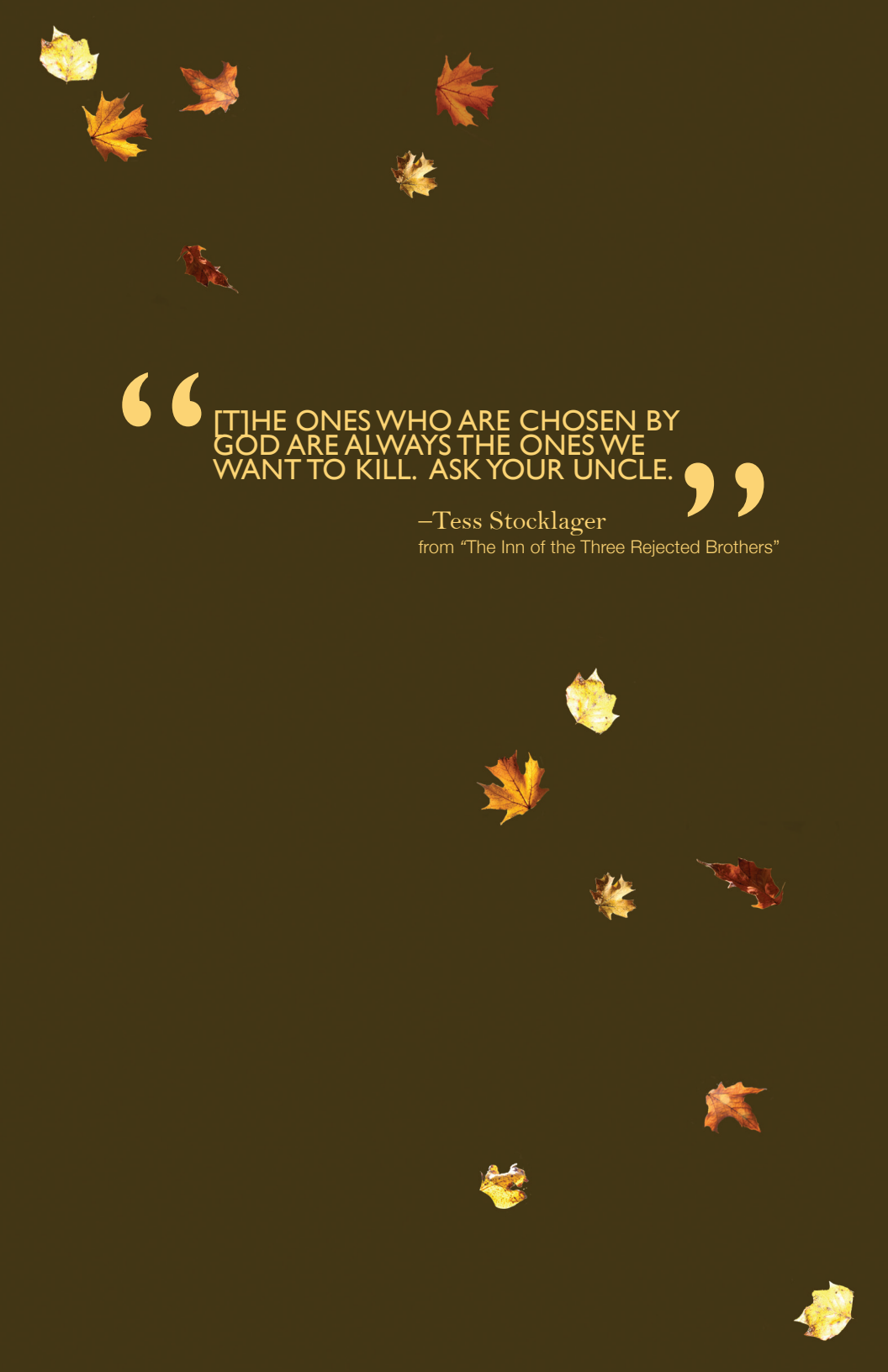
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“ [T]HE ONES WHO ARE CHOSEN BY  
GOD ARE ALWAYS THE ONES WE  
WANT TO KILL. ASK YOUR UNCLE. ”

—Tess Stocklager

from “The Inn of the Three Rejected Brothers”