

HEARTS AS BIG AS FISTS



OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST

ILLNESS & GRACE, TERROR & TRANSFORMATION
Heather Tosteson and Charles Brockett, Editors.
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OTHER STORIES

Heather Tosteson

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KNOW YOUR SOURCE

Every day or two, I make a new list and stare at it until all the names blur. I wish you were here and could choose for yourself. It makes such a difference what you get saddled with at birth.

“G-L-O-R-I-A,” my father would always greet me as a kid. Adding, “in Excelsis Deo,” when I began to pout—summing up very neatly all the reasons why I hated the names they’d imposed on me. My mother may have been responsible for Gloria, but my dad was responsible for the Excel. It looked good on his billboards. Excel Ford.

I had a friend in grade school, Rhonda, whose father built housing developments and named the streets after his three girls, his wife, and his mama. Rhonda Lane, Sharon Circle, Mabel Drive. You get the idea. But it wasn’t the same. No one teased Rhonda. Maybe because she was a sweet little button of a thing. I wasn’t.

“You have options,” my father would console me when I complained. “You can change your name once you turn eighteen. Until then I’m claiming you, like it or not. Maybe you’ll fall in love with someone named Wurm. Will Wurm. You can change your name to Glo. Or maybe Andrew Euphoria. Gloria Euphoria, that’s it.” There was a gleam in his eye. He refused to take my distress seriously. But he should have. I meant it. I didn’t like what they had laid on me and I needed him to see it.

My father’s name is Andy. Andy Excel. Better than Adonis Excess, he always told me. My mother’s name was Estelle—and that was only one of the reasons she shouldn’t have married my father. I may as well go into the others because sooner than later we’re going to be family. You and me. I’m



BECAUSE YOU ARE FREE

When she came in, she was taking a swig of water from a transparent gallon jug. Skin like milk. A soft voice. Educated. But she was wearing coveralls—something only a city woman would think of putting on when she was visiting the country. It was a way of accentuating her advantages, or had that effect, whatever she intended.

But I liked her right off. Something about the angle at which she tipped the jug up—something about the way she looked at me with her large black eyes, so innocent and knowing at the same time. I sent her over to admissions to sign all the forms. When she came back a half hour later, the jug was emptier but seemed to hang heavier in her hand. She wasn't trying to swallow from it anymore.

Once I had prepared her, had her pull her coveralls down until the stops and the bib were all collected between her legs like a soiled bedsheet, drawn her narrow blue cotton panties even lower than they naturally set, I took the information I needed from her. Her name. Age. That's it.

Look here, I told her soon as the signal picked it out. Oh, she said. Nothing more. Then, Oh, again as it turned its face to us and put its hand to its mouth.

Oh, she said. That's my baby there. In that hushed room, her voice spread out everywhere, bringing us all into focus.

The pictures I take, they're of all the sound our body won't absorb, that it sends back. What we're looking at are echoes. I guess that's true of light too, when you think of it, but I think of this machine, my technology, as

the woman I am now standing anchored inside the knife edge of light, strange shapes forming and dissolving inside the screen; the man Dwayne is now, moving restlessly inside our house like an idea inside my mind, the idea I can't get rid no matter how hard I try, that he dreams of men, that I am his only protection from what he truly loves and what he can't bear to know about himself. Just like he's been for me.

If God were a headlight, we would each be the figure standing there, hands out, protecting the other figure lying helpless on the ground.

We have deprived each other—out of love—of the love that reveals us to ourselves. The love that heals.

I do not want to find out that my husband does not love me—but even less do I want to think we will live together forever unable to change our natures or to accept them—unable to accept how much I desire the promise of life locked off inside my body, how much he does. I want to believe that I will go in to Dwayne and we will come with me down to the field and that we will lie down under the full moon in the tall grass and that all the love he has thrown out into the world, all those cries, will come to rest in me now. *Because we are free.* I want to believe that I will grow fat with opportunity.

I believe and I do not believe.

Look at me, Dwayne says, terrified, don't ever take your eyes off me. I don't know how to say, as God has said to me, healing with the same stroke that severs bone from marrow: *no.*



HEARTS AS BIG AS FISTS

There is something implicitly sexual in the metaphor that persuades her, but she doesn't realize this until days later, after the decision has already been made. When she understands, for a second she is stricken by the guilt that occasionally assails her when she remembers the sequence of affairs she had early in her marriage, how her daughter, who is now as closely connected to her as her right hand, then seemed something completely alien, devouring, and she turned to her young lovers as if their mouths could draw something more from her breasts than the thin blue milk that spilled into her daughter's mouth before her lips and bald gums could even close around the nipple.

It all seems so trivial now, even the guilt. What binds them together is beyond speech but not beyond bearing. Sometimes she imagines they are, the four of them—mother, father, daughter, son—the chambers of a heart. The image sustains her, some days, as if there is another will that surrounds their lives, transparent, resilient as a muscle.

Something happened to all us, she told the doctor, when they severed the sinus node. She sees him shift forward in his seat as if to answer. Something, she goes on quickly, that the pacemaker doesn't solve. This, she believes, was their true loss of innocence. Her son's heart will never beat on its own anymore. I don't think you can imagine what that means to us, she tells him. It was at that moment they understood they would all be changed beyond belief. Birth, she thought, was the closest you could come to the sensation—and, like birth, it took place without words, every nerve and muscle bundle registering that there was no retreat.

Now, when she remembers the peccadillos of her youth, what

astonishes her is the faith they implied. A life where personal satisfaction was the one true religion. Beautiful, the lover sighed, touching the contours of her breast, her lips, and what she felt was something close to spiritual transformation, some assurance she needed with all her being that she was among the saved. She tells herself that it was the way she was raised, it reflects as much about her culture as it does about herself, but it still astonishes her. Now. Where she's come to.

The difference, he tells her, between what I do and what a surgeon does is that although I can't see the heart with my own eyes, I can go as slowly as I need to. I run a catheter in and make one incision in the septum—

Two, she interrupts him.

One, he repeats. We enter through the pulmonary artery.

I take a balloon, a small one, and expand it. Then I stop. We measure everything. I expand the balloon a little more. Then I withdraw it and use one a little larger. We cut the gradient in half, we stop. We're not looking for perfection here.

I would like to pray for a miracle, she says as she kneels before the altar rail. She happened upon the church as she was returning to the hotel where her daughter and son are waiting for her. She has never been to a healing ceremony, has never been back to the denomination since she was a child. She remembers it as a temple to rationality.

The priest is a woman her own age. The priest listens intently as she describes the choices, the operations. She closes her eyes when the priest places her hands on her hair. The priest prays that she and her husband will be embraced by God as they make these difficult decisions, that the image of her son secure in Jesus' arms will imprint itself on her heart. The image that comes to her instead is the four of them at the lake before the last operation, the one that silenced the heart of the family. She sees her son swimming from one of them to the other. Four and buoyed by trust. She watches him strike out toward her. She sees the water spread out behind him like a train of light. She pulls him close to her, turning him around and letting him paddle on to



HANG GLIDING

They say I am lucky that I discovered it so early, that it hadn't spread. A little operation, a little excision from the muscle on my left calf. I can see it spinning in the little jar of alcohol my surgeon held up to me in the recovery room.

"Six weeks radiation for insurance and you'll be right as rain," he said. At least he didn't say little again.

What I want to talk about is something big. Permanent.

What they can't change is that at the age of nineteen years and thirty-two days a veil was ripped away from the world and nothing can replace it. I'm not of a mind to, although people find that hard to believe, but some days I can't stop blinking my eyes, the colors are so sharp, the odors so astringent. Maybe a veil is a bad metaphor. It isn't out there, after all, that the change has taken place. I remember my baby sister Cindy after she was given glasses exclaiming about how bright the world was. She discovered edges, categories. But I don't find this process reassuring at all. Maybe it is like, too late in life to assimilate it, having light hit the retina for the first time. I bet those late seers feel like me, betrayed, amazed, invaded by something so pervasive there is no relief. They too feel they'll never be able to relate any of the categories they've learned to this sensory bludgeoning the world calls sight.

I wonder what I will be able to say in the dorm when I return next month.

In my dreams, tumors orbit like planets.

There is a space that seems to last for a century between every word I hear.

I am cured.



MI VOZ

Many people imagine I cannot speak at all. When I do answer, they look startled, as if the sound itself were an indictment. My voice is so low and rough it sounds as if I have yelled myself hoarse at a cock fight or in a bar. When they hear me, I see their pity harden into contempt. I don't mind. There are all types of deception. The prince wears the skin of the frog, the wolf wears the fleece of the lamb.

Today, when my *patrón* asks me to scrub the tiles above the waterline, I only nod and do his bidding. But I wonder why he must have this *piscina* with the ocean stretching out forever just behind the next row of houses. I believe it is because the pale green glow of the water at night makes him feel like a rich man. He stands up there on the balcony and looks down on the bodies of his children diving and surfacing like dolphins, and he believes that no one will imagine that he works like a slave day and night.

But I have passed by the window to his office and have seen him staring blankly across the lawn. I don't know what he sees. Now that it is the dry season, the grass is the same color as the dusty road outside the wall. His face is the color of the dust, the grass, the empty road. He sits with his fingers balanced on his forehead, holding his head up as if it did not belong to him anymore.

I cannot imagine desiring anything so much that the thought of losing it would make me long for death as he does at those moments when he imagines no one can see him. I understand then that what people might call my cross has been my gift. I have never hoped as he has.

I move quietly away from the window. I know my shadow has, for a



SACRIFICE

It was in all the papers five years ago when my husband Benny gave my brother Dennis one of his kidneys. They wrote how we all saw Benny as a savior. I wonder, if a reporter could be bothered to come and visit us now, what he'd want to report. We wouldn't, my sister-in-law Janet and me, have any time to talk—we're too busy ferrying the two of them to the dialysis center twenty-five miles away. What could we say that wouldn't make things worse? I don't know how Janet feels, but I'm blisteringly angry at everyone except my own daughter Annie.

"It was one of the risks. I knew that when I offered," Benny tells me. His face is all puffed today because he's waited too long to go back to the center. He doesn't really care, or so it seems to me, whether he lives or dies. He says it's all in the Lord's hands. I think that is a terrible thing to teach his daughter—that you give and you die and God just beams down on you indifferently, whether you're a saint or a sinner. Like you have no right to any feelings in the matter—even when it's your own life that's at stake.

"You didn't ask me if it was a risk Annie and I wanted to take."

"He's your own brother, Carla," Benny says, his eyes widening.

"You didn't *ask* us," I say again, grinding the gears of the truck as I force it into reverse.

"Are you telling me you would have forbidden me?" Benny asks. He closes his eyes and leans back in the seat, which we have set reclined. His skin looks gray, his eyes look gray—just like the day, just like the future. He's so many down on the waiting list for a transplant that there's really no chance. At least Dennis is further down on the list.



MY COUNSELOR

My children tell me I talk too much, but that is because they don't listen. The ones that are left to me: my son Darrell and my daughter Josephina.

Darrell asks me, just like his twin Louis used to, "Can't you hold it in, Mama? Just this once, can't you get a hold of yourself?"

"Why?" I ask him. "Is that going to bring back Maurice? Is it going to bring back Louis?"

Darrell, he just shrugs and walks off. Louis and Maurice, they were my strength and my light, I tell my counselor.

Darrell's son, he's called Darrell too, or Rell for short, he's got his uncle Maurice's ring, the one I gave Maurice for graduating from school. Ten years, Maurice nagged me about it, telling me I'd promised it to him, telling me it showed I didn't care. When I finally bought it for him—it's got a little diamond in the middle—he lifted me right off the ground. But I never saw it on his hand.

Now Rell wears it around his neck where he thinks I can't see it. Or maybe he's hiding it from his cousins. But they didn't want nothing from their uncle Maurice—except Pryor wanted the snakeskin boots—until he saw how Maurice had cut them off in the back so they was like mules.

Pryor is Josephina's son. He can afford to keep his distance. He can't remember how Maurice watched over him before he could walk or speak. Maurice only fourteen and Josephina not even a full year older. Rell now, he remembers what he owes Maurice. He's lived most his life under the same roof with him. Mine. Darell, Rell and Maurice, they were my home boys. I



PIERCINGS

Ternura was the word his latest sex interest used to describe what was missing in their relationship.

Andy, of course, flinched at the word relationship. He was all set to correct Worth, when he began to wonder if he had his name right. The young man had been baptized to the two-last-name variety of Southern privilege, ubiquitous in the college, but affected by Andy himself only in even years. His Truman Capotes, Reynolds Prices, Randall Jarrells, Leland Spencers and Lamar Alexanders. But was he Worth Tyler, this young man with the requisite white shirt, striped tie and blue blazer? Or was he Tyler Worth? Once the question arose, it was impossible to set it to rest.

“*Ternura*,” the young man said again, rolling the word around on his tongue with obvious relish. His eyes were the only unexpected thing about him, a blue with the texture of scoured bottle glass. However much you looked into them, you never felt you had focused, taken them in.

He was in his second semester of required Spanish, but was developing a taste for it that Andy was beginning to realize might be distinguished from Andy, his Spanish professor. This, too, gave Andy a little pause. He was used to sending his students, laid or unlaid, on. He wasn’t into entanglements. But he found something about Worth Tyler’s openness to those foreign words and worlds, his unconflicted relish in them, disturbing.

The young man’s tongue touched the back of his upper teeth. His lips stretched and pursed. “*Ternura*,” he said again. “It holds all these interesting

MY KUNDALINI EXPERIENCE

There wasn't one.

Everything was prepared for it. I took time off from work, I was so sure it was coming. I talked to Solár, my bodywork guru, about what I should do when it happened. Not if, when.

“Wow,” she said. “Go with the flow!” Solár is street smart, body smart, but doesn't have a large verbal range. I'm a numbers person in general, so we get along well. She's a great masseuse. I keep my eyes closed when she performs the more arcane of her massage techniques, like dusting off my astral body. But this kundalini thing, it resonated, the moment I heard about it, in ways I still can't explain. It's not the theory that interests me, just the phenomenon. The moment I heard about it, I knew, I just knew, it was possible. I don't feel the same way about telepathy or astral travel or channeling or past lives. Resurrection either, for that matter.

Since I'm a scientist and believe in research, I attended a meeting on kundalini experiences held in San Francisco. (I arranged to make a site visit to one of the Superfund sites in San Francisco at the same time, which allowed the Centers for Disease Control, where I work, to foot most of the travel costs. Not for the conference, of course, which I attended secretly on my own time and dime.) Researchers came from all over the world, but mainly from California and Colorado, where, I suppose, more people have kundalini experiences, as well as about every other kind of altered consciousness imaginable. Perhaps alternative states are fostered by the Rockies, the desert, the smog, the New Age zeitgeist. Maybe the forests of central Georgia are an impediment. Location, location, location, as they say.

I didn't fit in, of course. When you look at me, you think dork. I wear fitted suits chosen for their blandness. In a bureaucracy, I think of it as protective coloration; at Solár's, as idiosyncrasy; but there at the kundalini conference, it was just awkward. I should have been wearing a flowing kimono jacket or an Indian dress. I eagerly learned all the signs of a genuine experience, the colored lights, the spastic movements—which they called automatic asanas and mudras, the convulsive rising of energy from the base of your spine through all your energy centers right out the crown of your head and, depending, back over to your third eye. I learned about all the neurological correlates to the chakras, and about the holistic benefit of such an experience. You were never the same, everyone agreed—researchers, therapists, yogis, and your all-purpose New Age yearner after purpose and thrills. Obviously, I didn't fit any of the categories, but I did think, *This sounds right. This really sounds right.*

Five days later, I bought a two-week supply of frozen dinners more nutritious and dependable than anything I ever prepare myself and left them for my daughter and husband and went off to a cabin on the Gulf coast I'd borrowed secretly from my friend Loli. Where I am now. Waiting. Still waiting.

“I'll call in every day,” I told Kevin and Melanie as I left. “I just need to be able to control access.” I wouldn't tell them the address either, just said I'd be sure to call and, if there were a real emergency, they could always call my friend Loli. I did leave her phone numbers—both work and home. Of course, I had forgotten that Loli was attending a conference in Brussels, but even if they call and somehow hook up with her, I don't think they will succeed in worming my whereabouts out of her. At least not under normal circumstances—like ear ache, flu, or first menstrual period. Probably not even mono. Or stage fright.

Loli has no children—or husband—and is big into self-care and hearing the Goddess out whenever, and in whatever form, she appears. We go to the same bodyworker and work in the same public health agency, where we never let on about our favored extracurricular activities. Actually, we rarely see each other at work since she does sex practices and behavior change over in HIV and I do toxic waste. At the bodywork salon, we discuss auras and



THE CEREMONY

It doesn't matter what I'm doing, that day is sacrosanct. From wherever I am, I get myself on a plane and go and visit my mother's grave with clippers and flowers.

"Like an old biddy," my mother scoffs.

"At your bidding," I tell her as I neatly lay out the gardening tools—trowel, fertilizer, grass trimmer, whisk broom. This time I've brought bulbs, even though it isn't their proper planting season. I suppose I'm trying to buy myself some time. I can imagine missing a year if there are amaryllis and paper whites and crocuses and purple tulips holding my place. I've even brought some canna and day lily bulbs to extend the flowering season.

"I knew it wouldn't last," my mother sighs. "Whatever you said, I knew you couldn't hold out."

As usual, what I do counts for nothing. I'm twenty-six. I've been doing this for seven years.

"Why?" therapists—and my new lover, Lyle—have all asked me. "It's not like you feel she appreciates it."

It's impossible to explain. My mother was always of two minds—pulling me close with one hand, shoving me back with the other. Death doesn't change that.

"It's important to me to hold fast," I tell them. "She was my mother after all."

After all, she was my all for years.

"And do I hear a thank you hidden in there?" my mother asks bitterly.

“Yes.

So we sit there silently, looking first at each other and then out at the valley and surrounding mountains, the bare trees that are just feeling the first slow surges of sap.

“I am so glad,” he says at last. “I wouldn’t have asked again.”

“I know. That push-pull hurts like hell. No reason to repeat it.”

Then, changing the subject, or not, I say, “I have something to show you, but not until sunset.”

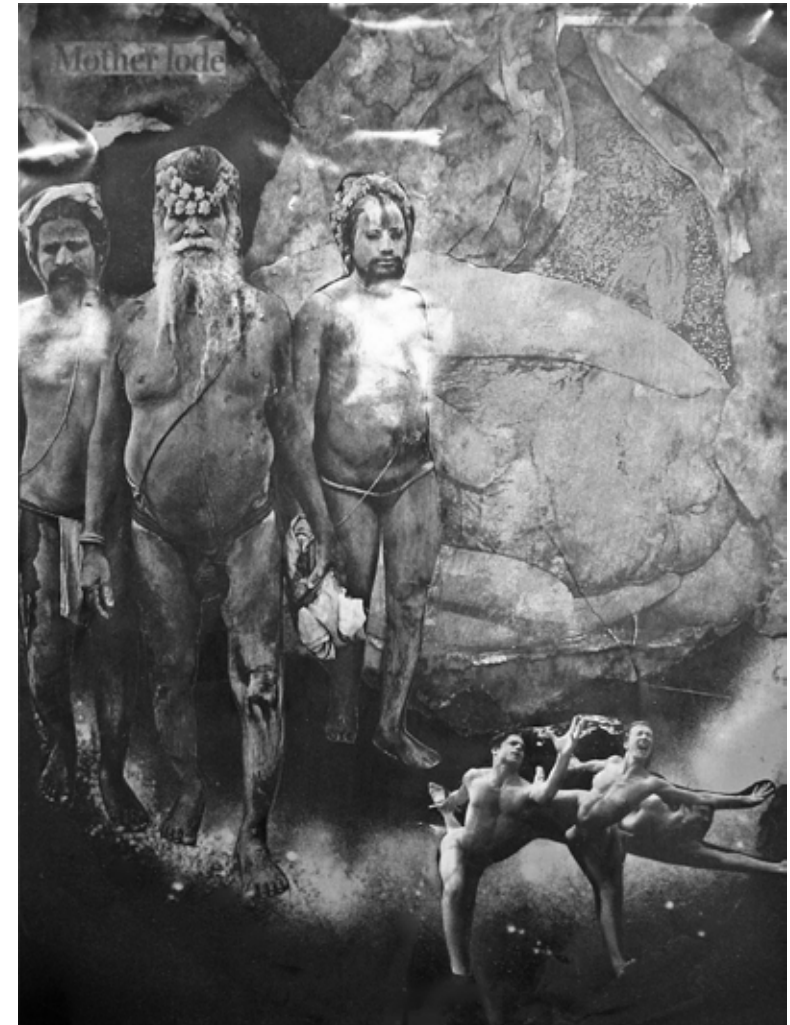
I spend the late afternoon with my hacksaw creating a real, freely opening door, and when the time comes, I bring Lyle up there and he helps me light all the candles and then we sit there, shoulder to shoulder, watching them flicker and flare with the wind, no more questions asked, no more answers given, but some deep sweet certainty taking root in us nonetheless.

“To Trudy,” I say, tipping the champagne bottle up and draining the dregs.

“May she rest in peace.”

“Good enough,” I agree.

In the morning, our sheets carry the traces of everything we have just passed through, dirt and gold paint, semen, dry leaves, wax, and roots finer than my mother’s hair.



KEEPSAKES

So much has changed with these cocktails. My friends may seem like the mechanical figures in Bavarian clocks, their alarms going off every hour and the ubiquitous pillbox pulled from their briefcase or bag, their heads bobbing as they select and swallow. But it's nothing like those years where I seemed to keep constant vigil at one deathbed after another. And the quilts. In May of 1993, I had six friends die within two weeks of each other. For the next few months, I felt like we were in an illegal sweatshop, working nights and weekends trying to get the quilts ready for the last complete showing of the whole quilt in Washington. My fingertips were covered with so many small pinpricks it looked as if I was sweating blood.

The fights we had trying to fit everything into those small rectangles. Whole lives squished into a space smaller than a coffin lid. We didn't want anything left out—bathhouses and one night stands, long-time companions, his secret high school crush, favorite food, the face of his mother, the address of his estranged father.

"Jim would have wanted," Paul would say, laying claim. And Steve, Jim's lover for ten years but not for the last year and a half, would lash back: "Don't tell me who Jim was." Don't tell me, Steve meant, who *he* was. Or was not. We were all trying to order our own lives, salvage some meaning from all the debris. Dead people leave so much debris: papers and books, the odd, chipped yellow dish, new black leather sofa, geometric patterned sheets, briefs. As you clean out attics, closets, bureaus, the dust clings to your sweating skin like ash, but you can't bring them back.

And that's what each of us wanted—the one memory, the one memento that brought them back, one by one, bitchy or breezy, demented or sane, uniquely and for all time: Jim, Curt, Jody, Greg, Alan, Ricardo, Jesús, Mario, Luis. We wanted to stitch into those quilts the contradictions that made them complete. The way Alan couldn't walk through a room without leaving a chaotic wake—papers on the floor, books over-turned, sugar on the table, but his clothes always looked as if he had just slipped them out of a dry cleaning bag. Or Luis' penchant for multi-colored condoms and plain white briefs. We wanted people looking at our quilts to know exactly who we'd lost, just as, when our own time came, we wanted our friends to bicker and boss us back into existence: "I have a lock of his hair from—" "I have a cryptic love note from—" "I have the label from his favorite bottle of wine. We drank it just last month. A Pier 19 discount Chilean, but who's complaining?" Given all this, it felt no end weird to receive the letter from my sister Karen suggesting that the seven of us collaborate on making a quilt for our parents 55th wedding anniversary. She provided us with the dimensions for each panel and asked that we all try to contribute more than one. Laura and she would commit to sewing three each, to make up for any time pressures the rest of us might have. Each panel was to be one foot square, with a 5/8 inch hem-width border. All on permanent press cotton for easy maintenance. No constraints on color. But they wanted us all to concentrate on significant moments in our parents lives. Nothing conflictual, they added.

I put the letter down, laughing, and Miguel looked at me puzzled. Unlike him, I almost never communicate with my parents or the majority of my siblings. I visit my parents for one token weekend every year. My youngest sister, Chris, visits me every couple of years, as does the sister closest to me in age, Maggie. The whole quilt project would never have been suggested if my parents' off-spring didn't list slightly in favor of the female persuasion. But the emphasis on nice is a gender-free family trait. In all my fifty years, my homosexuality has never been spoken of directly by anyone in my family except, once or twice, by my sister Chris. They have never met Miguel, my companion of twenty-five years. They have never mentioned any of my six novels with their obviously homosexual protagonists. When asked what I do, they all volunteer the name of the university where I have an adjunct



MY POWER IS IN YOU

When I had the vision that changed my life, I was sitting in the driver's seat of a borrowed van waiting as my sister Marisol unloaded her new paintings from the back and carried them into the gallery with the help of my husband, Carlos, and a workman at the gallery.

"Gentle, gentle," Marisol kept muttering as Carlos and the handyman grabbed the large paintings.

I was peering up at the sky wondering if it was going to rain and what the roads would be like on the twelve hour ride to our house on the coast. Since the tragedy last year, we all fear rain that lasts longer than an hour. We know it can bring down mountains in the blink of an eye. I had closed my eyes, savoring the light on my eyelids, delicate as a lover's kiss, and then, suddenly anxious, I looked up again scanning the sky for clouds with dark linings. That was when I saw him.

He was indescribably beautiful, as young men in their twenties can be, filled with a joyous, untested manhood that lights their unmarked skin from within. They have as much strength as they will ever have but a sweetness that connects them to the boy they once were. They have not lost the last traces of the mothering that brought them into being, a kind of trusting stillness. It is what has already begun to disappear from my own son's face.

But it was there, on the Savior's face, that sweet, feeding attention. I understood I was seeing him when he was still a carpenter, before his years of healing began. He was staring into my eyes with this kind but intense interest. I couldn't take my eyes from his. They were deep brown, and his long dark hair gleamed like the ocean lit by a full moon. I felt a wave of the deepest



HEATHER TOSTESON, a writer, visual artist and spiritual director, has received a Nation/Discovery prize for her poetry and fellowships for poetry, fiction, and photography from MacDowell, Yaddo, the Virginia Center for the Arts, and Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences. Her poetry, stories, and essays have appeared in numerous literary magazines. She holds a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from Ohio University. She has worked as a science writer, editor, and communications consultant in public health, where she has had a long standing interest in social trust, professional identity, and the intersection of belief systems. She is co-founder and co-director of Universal Table. She lives with her husband in Atlanta, Georgia.