

“Faith”

Second Place

BY ELIZA CAMPBELL

Why start? Why stop? Why tempt the knowledge, or idea of knowledge? I am thinking these questions as I lie in a leather chair by the window upstairs: lying there immobilized once again. Why turn to the unknown, igniting the body? Why turn to the known, inflaming the mind? Why do people continue to believe? Why do they continue to not believe? Why don't people understand? I shift in my chair as I wonder. Through the high window, the winter evening-nights prove more beautiful and arresting than any flame I can imagine. I have a tendency to listen to Jeff Buckley, listening again and again as his high and floating voice pounds through the walls of my doubt, echoing downstairs in the gentle evening.

I used to think these questions to myself quietly at church, as softly as possible. I whispered the questions to myself as I took up the sacrament in my chubby pre-adolescent hand. I asked those questions as I looked at the faces of the ones who didn't pay attention in Sunday School, and who later broke the codes, leaving me behind.

The first time the questions became loud was that bleak February afternoon when I was fifteen; I was fifteen and everything was bleak, bleak, bleakness as far as I could see. I asked those questions as I first felt the tears come, as I looked out the window into the arresting night and into the arresting possibilities of questions, looking again deeply with pain and fear because my best friend was calling to tell me that she was drunk again.

This is an essay about faith.

I was sitting in a church basement, without emotion, because when you're a kid, emotion is negotiable. Or rather, emotion is too consuming to be a condition: you cry, or you don't cry. But when that crying starts to symbolize something lost, something unattainable, something that no grown-up can give, that is when the faith begins to shove its way through your skin. I cried in this way on an Easter Sunday when I was seven. We were in the seminary room, watching a glowing Jesus movie with the lights turned off. The room was terribly dark. I always thought of Jesus as a fluorescent light: grown-ups were always turning him on and pushing him in my face. He was the color of yawning: he flickered assurance. And he buzzed, a soft irritating buzz that was constant in whatever room he possessed. But that Easter Sunday, I watched the TV and Jesus was hurt.

I watched as Jesus was hurt. He was hurt so badly. White flesh shakes, vinegar-robed filth, bloody scalp. It was disgusting, unreal. I reached out to turn him off, to create the wall of fiction between him and me, but suddenly it didn't matter that he was a lightbulb, or that I was watching a movie, because the feelings I had were too real to ignore. I realized somehow that there were some kinds of pain in the world that would never be taken away. And I looked around to make sure the room was dark enough, and that no boys were looking at me. And then I cried softly, bitterly, hot steaming tears in the black, black room.

There is truth. There is pain. There is two nights before Thanksgiving, in the cold. My mom



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was principal of a middle school, one that had been neglected, underfunded, and segregated: one that had been allowed to bow to crushing unfairness. At least half of her students lived at or below the poverty line; some were in gangs, some spoke no English, some would never graduate. But she advocated the use of school money to buy fifty Thanksgiving turkeys, an action that surpassed and ignored the futility of painful poorness, of despair. One by one, home by home, we drove in our car to the houses of those who privately requested this assistance. We delivered turkeys, an act of the purest faith.

In one house, three little girls sat on the front porch in the cold as their parents screamed and fought inside, and we left the turkey with the girls. We couldn't go inside the door of one other house because at least twenty residents were crowded in one of the apartment's two rooms. We pulled up to one house and saw two cars parked facing each other in front. Young men sat inside each, hollow-eyed as they stared down their rival gang. We pulled away quickly, the pile of turkeys tumbling over in the trunk.

Some houses were irrepressibly cheerful. "Thank y'all so much, it's a great thing you're doing, take care." Some houses were angry: sarcastic thanks, glares, doors slammed. Which response was more upsetting?

One house was not a house. We rode down Aurora Avenue, a long hopeless street crowded with lit-up pink fluorescent signs, yellow liquor stores, blue prostitutes, and those who were lost among them. Following a map, my mother turned.

"This is it," she said, very softly. She said it as softly as I questioned myself during sacrament all of those years ago. She said it so softly, so softly, because we had arrived at the last home: a crumbling motel, built for one-night stands. She opened her car door, and shook her head when I attempted to do the same. When she came back ten full minutes later, relieved of the turkey, she looked as though she had died. "It's a mother and her son," she said steadily. "They're homeless. He takes the bus to school. He's deaf." Her steadiness collapsed, and she burst into tears on the steering wheel.

All of us live by faith. We live by pure, perplexing faith.

Why start? The questions have begun now, pounding gently into my skull and my chest whenever there is a moment to really look at these things I see. These are the questions of my seven-

year-old self, bending and unanswerable questions asked over and over and over, irritatingly so: why did Jesus hurt so badly? Why are people homeless? Why do very poor young men spend their money on guns, and wage war? Why are some of my friends' parents divorced? Why do so many people hurt but continue to believe? Why don't people understand? Why stop? Why start? I think these things to myself as Jeff Buckley sings sweetly into the side of my head, and I gaze out the window into the growing dusk.

But then I turn fifteen, and my private spaces are opened. I begin to see the changing lives around me. I heard first through seventh grade gossip (Jell-O shots, oral sex, weed smoked in the bushes). I was mainly incredulous, and my friends agreed; we shared mutual condescension, a mutual sense of questioning. But things began to move like planets: gently and hugely expanding, exploding. People began to drink, in a circle that became closer and closer and around me. People began to leave their houses, run from their parents, lie to their brothers and their sisters. I spent more weekends alone as parties began to form whose exclusive purpose was intoxication. I became the friend that people loved to confess to, whose reactions and innocence were enjoyable, flammable. I pretended to be cool; I pretended not to have questions. I looked out windows.

But on that bleak February night, the questions burst out of me, as loud as stars, as clear as vodka. My best friend Alana was beautiful, flaky, and impulsive. We were innocent. We were a kind of faith.

One night when I was fifteen, she called me at home in her giggly way and told me she had a crazy story. I sat down, hard. I knew what was coming. I barely listened as she gave me a stream of excited proud narrative (vodka and Sprite, vomit, loss, first time, hands in pants, boys seeking), offering only my coolness. Then I hung up and felt the questions begin to come up, acidic like her vomit, questions that were sharp in my stomach, the faith pulling me in another painful direction, the churning of parallel knowledge. I knew now that faith asked questions, and that I needed to ask questions, and to question myself. Eliza? I asked.

"Eliza?" Alana asked after a silence, for confirmation, for coolness. But she was already spinning away from me like a planet, choosing to leave me behind in my leather chair. And I began to feel that loss again, loss that I was forced to accept, loss as

terrible as a movie of Jesus that I could not stop.

This is an essay about faith. And the essence of faith is dichotomy: unshakable knowledge in the face of bloody questions, pain tempered with deep sweetness, a presence of the divine mixed with never-ending suffering. Here I am, on my leather chair on this wintery Friday night. The sun goes down, the sun comes up. I wax and wane like the moon. I cringe. I laugh.

And as I grow older, as my private spaces become deeper, the paradox will only widen. The imbalance will grow, the sense of division will strengthen. In brief: the questions will get louder.

But the answers will deafen them.

(We are in the forest. The night is dark blue and chilly, the trees sharpen around a circle of benches. Girls go up to a microphone to bear

their testimonies, to cry, to sing, and I am not impressed. There are two huge fires, orange flames leaping on either side of the girl with the shaking microphone. Suddenly time stops. I look and the fire blazes against the bleeding blue sky and the stars are as cloudy as meat and blood and heaven opens slightly and the flames climb and sing for me and time pulses for me, and I hear the voice of God: I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know I know I know I know I know why, I know why against everything, with everything, I know, I know I know I know forever and ever.)

The answers are deafening, and I am shouting with sureness and laughter through the high winter window.

I am asking and answering the questions loudly in my leather chair. ■