

THE SERVANT'S SACHEL

by

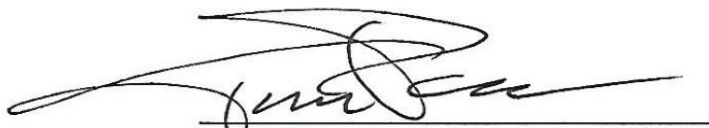
Spencer Todd Bennington

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of English

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tim Poland

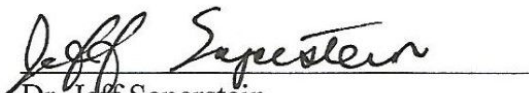
May 2014

© Spencer Todd Bennington




Dr. Tim Poland
Thesis Advisor

3-20-14
Date



Dr. Jeff Saperstein
Committee Member

3/20/14
Date



Dr. Don Secreast
Committee Member

3/20/14
Date

Abstract

The Servant's Satchel is a creative thesis in the form of a novella which begs the question “how would the New Testament be affected by a completely humanized Jesus character?” This work of fiction aims to depict the protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth, in a historically accurate first century Palestine, devoid of any contemporary theological slant or embellishment. The purpose here is to speculate what the early Christian Church could have grown into if the outspoken political bishops (like Irenaeus of the second century) had not quashed the philosophies, treatises, and sacred texts of the Gnostics. How would the contemporary Christian church be different, for instance, if parishioners had a common knowledge of The Gospel of Thomas, wherein Jesus explains that all men and women have the ability to achieve a spiritual state of the divine? How might the socio-political climate of 21st century America have benefited if Paul had never penned the words that through “faith alone” believers are saved, not by good works? In short, my depiction of Jesus serves to spur the reader to aspire to ascend to a new level of consciousness and compassion instead of simply putting faith into a hierarchical, apocalyptic, and violent mythos.

The narrative is set between the baptism of Jesus and the start of his ministry in Galilee. This period is generally referred to as the “forty days” when Jesus wandered the desert and was tempted by Satan. In this novella, Jesus is wandering in search of some sort of spiritual truth or fulfillment. After adopting many radical and ascetic lifestyles, circumstance finds Jesus badly wounded and lost in the outskirts of the Persian Empire. He is taken in by a nameless guru who agrees to teach him the science of first century medicine as preserved in historical texts like the Sushruta Samhita (circa 600 BCE). After formal lessons in herbalism, Ayurvedic treatments, conjuring, and energy manipulation, a

fully fallible and mortal Jesus develops the skills necessary to begin his own monumental healing mission in Palestine, and he matures to the point where he can begin to face his own emotional demons.

Ultimately, Jesus must decide what role he will play upon the return to his native land: that of the empirical doctor which he has learned to be, that of the erratic charismatic to which Galilee is accustomed, or that of a third, more hybridized, persona—a healer more deserving of the title *medicine man*.

Dedication

*For she who wears
mermaid hair
and
glows infinity
from
star-rimmed eyes*

Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank my parents, Mike and Susie Bennington, for supporting me in the summer of 2013 when I bummed around, ate their food, and spent my days writing this thesis in their basement instead of earning a paycheck. I'd also like to thank my grandmother, Betty "Mama" Todd, for always being a willing reader. I love you guys.

Also, a special thanks to Dr. Paul Thomas. Even though he wasn't officially on my committee, he took time out of his schedule to help me with some research for this endeavor. That is a true example of scholarly generosity.

Next, I'd like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Don Secreast and Dr. Jeff Saperstein, not only for agreeing to work with me on this project, but for their overall contribution to my graduate education. Dr. Secreast's fiction workshop was one of the best creative writing classes I have ever taken and Dr. Saperstein was always an affirmative and delightful presence in the Radford GTA/GTF Mentoring Program.

A gigantic thanks to Alana Baker for her love and eternal willingness to read, proofread, edit, and criticize. Her ability to endure my forever-ego-narcissism through this entire process is something I'll never be able to understand. Also, if you hadn't taken my heathen ass to church that one time, this novella wouldn't even exist. Think about it.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Dr. Tim Poland, my thesis advisor and voice of reason, for his unbelievable help and support. You took a chance and put your faith in some strange grad student (one you barely knew) who wouldn't shut up about the Bible. Without your no-holds-barred criticism and your suggestion to cut the draft in half (twice!) this work would be nowhere near the caliber it is in its present form. You have, by far, made the greatest impact on my educational career here at Radford, and even though you wouldn't let me title this novella *Jesus Christ, Medicine Man*, I thank you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Inscription.....	vii
THE SERVANT’S SACHEL.....	1
Afterword.....	128
Where Stories Come From.....	128
Stripping Away Divinity.....	129
Medical Knowledge and Research.....	140
A “Where’s Waldo?” Approach to Academics.....	148
A Brief and Final Note on Craft.....	156
Point of View.....	157
Imagery.....	158
Thought Verbs, Hiding the Gun, and Establishing Authority.....	160
Works Cited.....	164
Works Consulted.....	165

*And these tend inward to me,
and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these
more or less I am*

--Walt Whitman

THE SERVANT'S SATCHEL

“In order to cleanse blood,” the croaking voice rolled and echoed through the shadowy cliffs, “you must offer blood.”

His disciples were flickering shades, undulating in the glow of the bonfire, fastening the ropes and preparing the incense for the initiate.

Tabhach held high the sacred hallaf of his tribe and exclaimed, “Always!”

His brothers stopped in their preparations, and each beat his chest with a clenched fist. “Always!” they repeated in unison. Then they fell silent, each kneeling to face his elder.

Tabhach’s scaled hands clenched the bone shaft of the Sun and Moon blade, so named for its two hooked knives on either end. One crooked edge was camouflaged against the sky, a sharpened black stone that looked as if it were forged from midnight in a kiln of burning stars. The other polished end shone a bright white like the pure flame of sacrifice.

The wielder of this ritual weapon wore no special garments for the ceremony. His body was covered with the same ashen black rough tunic as all the other chanting disciples. But he stood out as a leader, not because he spoke to the brotherhood or because he held the ritual blade, but his beard was clearly the longest and the brightest white. And even though they all adhered to the same fasting regimens, Tabhach looked less sickly than all the rest, more robust. As he spoke more and more his eyes grew wide with that same white gleam, pockets of stark absence on an otherwise radical face.

He looked down from the clear night sky and into the eyes of the acolyte. “You have come here for truth, for knowledge,” Tabhach stepped closer to the raging fire and

the initiate, “and you have trained your body for months—felt the scratch of the sack cloth upon your skin, the pang of hunger in fasting, the burning points of rocks upon your soles.” He paused and hovered over the young man, studying every line in his sun-scorched face. “But you have yet to purify your spirit!”

The ceremony raged around the large bonfire, but this activity was a small nuisance in the otherwise vacant desert. Around the gathered men were the dry sands of midnight, blowing coolly in the chilled air, settling on rocks and still surfaces. The animals had abandoned this place. Surrounding the flat expanse of lonely arid plain on three sides were the elevated cavern openings of the ascetics. High into the sky the stone face of the hills was pocked with tiny holes that a man could crawl inside for quiet prayer, or some other such nefarious deed.

Tabhach turned from the silent young man to his brethren, these holy cave-dwellers, kneeling in their places around the fire. Each of them wearing the simple rope cording around their waist, each of them piles of skin stretched too tightly over bone. He made a simple gesture and one of the disciples stood and held out both hands, palms upward, to hold the hallaf. “We have gathered this evening to pray that our LORD sees this body fit to bear the weight of an enlightened spirit. We have gathered here to heal this young man, so that he might stay with us, so that he might devote his life to the secret teachings of Manaemus!”

The shadow-skeletons spoke as one body, “Praise be!”

The tribal elder turned once more to the acolyte, each of his wrists bound to a stake in the earth with corded leather, his eyes focused steadily on the flame, the rise and fall of his chest slow and controlled. Tabhach ran a hand through his braided white beard

and studied the initiate once more. This time he spoke to the young man. “Are you prepared to heal your spirit and relinquish the pains of your past?”

The young man moved his eyes towards the elder’s stare and nodded.

“Are you prepared to offer yourself to the fires so that you may be cleansed and born anew?”

Again, the initiate nodded in silence. His stern glare was unyielding.

“And are you prepared to accept your new name? Ze’ev, the wolf? And with it, your new life in this tribe?”

The initiate took a deep breath and said, “I offer myself to the Lord, the one true God.”

Tabhach nodded and took back the hallaf from his stone-still disciple as carefully as he placed it. Walking behind the acolyte, the elder said to all present, “May He be a merciful and benevolent Lord.” When Tabhach was in position behind the young man he motioned for the disciples to ready the incense bundles and the fan. The servant who had held the hallaf quickly fetched the dried esfand petals and placed them into a clay bowl. The scarlet herbs were ignited with a hot coal and the dish was fastened around the acolyte’s neck with a thin rope. Other disciples were tossing similar herbal bouquets into the fire and fanning the flames with tarps.

As the thick, fragrant smoke wafted towards Tabhach and his initiate on waves of hot air, he held the Sun and Moon blade high into the sky once again. “Lord, may this darkest of your stones draw the evil from this young man, and may it flow easily from his soul.” The old mystic brought the sharp hook down slowly into the flesh of the acolyte’s

back. Starting below his left shoulder blade and curving left, down towards the floating ribs, Tabhach began to chant the words of the ritual:

Khat Sahb...Khat Sahb...Khat Sahb!

The dull black stone slit the taut skin of the initiate's back, and Tabhach's unsteady hands caused the wound to crack in all directions like ice shattering. By the time the crescent was carved into the young man's body, his whole left side was soaked in the dark viscous fluid.

"The wound must be great so that the misdeeds and pain of the past can pour out." Tabhach stepped away from the shivering young man and held the dripping end of the hallaf over the fire. As the acolyte's blood dripped into the flames and passed through the billows of rolling smoke, the disciples began to chant as their master had.

Khat Sahb, Khat Sahb, KHAT SAHB!

The young man held his head low and tried not to scream.

"Breathe in deep, young one," Tabhach said in a booming voice. He walked back to his place behind the initiate. "Breathe in deep and exhale slowly, for as the breath leaves your body, so too does your blood. And it carries with it the sin of a lifetime!"

The disciples were in frenzy now, chanting louder than the constant darkness.

Tabhach held up the clean end of his blade, the polished white hook. "With this cut, I give you access to the Light—and when you breathe, you shall inhale the breath of the LORD!" The old man brought the knife down swiftly and with purpose towards the base of the other shoulder. This end was much sharper and slid through the young man's skin like the dawn, slicing deeper than the first, but in such a thin curvature that the blood

was slow to form. And when it did, it appeared as small beads, gradually swelling, but never sliding down.

The young man, now decorated with symmetrical scars outlining his lungs, still stood without making a sound. His body shook and his muscles tightened, but he would not scream. Tabhach took this gesture for pride and handed off the ritual blade. “Open your eyes initiate, and gasp for the Breath.” The old man, still standing behind his acolyte, rubbed his hands together until they grew hot. “You came here lost, a wandering Nazorean, but if you open your soul,” Tabhach raised his hands to the sky, “you can be transformed!” And on the last word, he smacked his callused palms onto the fresh wounds, a thunderclap that brought the young man to his knees, and unleashed a screeching wail that hushed the chanting disciples and all voices who dared to pollute the desert with their noise.

As he crashed to the dirt, his wrists still bound and arms outstretched, the smoldering plants around his neck jostled and shot sparks into his sweat-soaked face. A cloud of smoke flooded into his sinuses, and the world turned the glowing color of the flames that engulfed his vision. He drew the air around him into his belly in a single gulp, and suddenly, he saw that he could swallow the world. The austere faces of the tribe, the burning heat of the bonfire, the pulse of his scars all fell, and he fell too. Falling, falling, falling, through a dancing chasm of smoke and color, he felt the lowness of the stool, felt the hollow emptiness of his father’s little stone house, and he felt the longing of a daydream that pulled him from that horrid native place so many months ago.

And once again he heard it calling him, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. A voice reverberating through the brush and through the river, a voice far, far away. “For years you have all been extorted, used, and discarded by the corrupt men of the cloth. Our families, our houses, have been laid to spiritual waste because we have entrusted our salvation to VIPERS!” This voice came from a beastly man whose face was covered by patches of bushy beard and wild hair. His tunic was a camel pelt and his sustenance—locusts.

John, known by many as the baptizer, cried out, loud enough for the trees to quiver and the waters to ripple at his waist. “And they tell you that your sins make you unclean, and that you must cleanse yourself in holy water. Temple water! But I ask you, is not all of God's water holy?”

Maybe the young man had not heard *these* words, but he had heard John preach many like them. And on this day, one of great grief and mourning, they were the only words he could think of. On this day, his only wish was to step into that river, and to never come out. To wash away all of his pain and sadness, to wash away all of himself, and start anew.

“Jesus?” James said again. “Are you sure you won’t eat? This challah is still warm.”

He opened his eyes and looked around to study the room, the air, the *time*. Jesus felt the friendly cloth of the tunic his mother had made for him resting lightly on his shoulders. Shoulders free from any scars or blood. The tribe’s magic must have been working.

“Hello? Jesus, are you with me? Food? You want some or not?”

Jesus just shook his head without looking up at his older brother. Or, rather, the memory of his older brother. He wasn't hungry, and he especially wasn't in the mood for any of James's *practical jokes*. That bread was probably filled with bugs...or nails.

"You've got to eat something, little brother."

Jesus said nothing. He was still listening intently, as if he might hear the voice of his daydream trail through the wind and whisper some answer in his ear. Maybe that's why he had been taken back here. James walked away and sat with some of the other men from town in the corner of the small stone room. Jesus sighed in relief and turned to gaze outside, even though the window was covered with black cloth. If he could just glimpse some ray of light poking through the cracks, if he could just see the color of the sky that day...but he couldn't. And perhaps he shouldn't. Perhaps, if he lifted the veil from the window, he would only see the glaring eyes of Tabhach and his disciples, he would only see through the illusion of healing.

Instead, as he turned he saw the deep crimson of his mother's swollen eyes. He saw her tiny frame heaving as she sobbed in the center of other mourners, all with little or nothing to say. And when Jesus saw this, he too wept. Silently, and alone.

The first day of shiva is always the hardest. And he was going to have to endure it twice.

That night, when the guests had all left and when the mourners were a sleeping crowd, whimpering wet breaths on the floor, Jesus stayed on his rickety stool with his knees nearly to his chin. It was the one he and Joseph had crafted all those years ago, the one that they could never quite level. Despite the late hour, the only part of Jesus's body falling asleep was his legs. But they were shards of twisted glass that he did not feel, for

his mind was trapped somewhere in the aether of dreaming and waking. He stared deep into the pitiful flickering flame of the only oil lamp they could afford to keep burning. His eyes locked onto the light but the dancing shadows formed pictures, images that brought him back to years before, back to a time when Joseph was still alive and well.

Falling again, he smelled the smoke of the wild rue, and heard the chanting rumble of ritual in his head. He would keep falling and falling into the darkness until everything was poured out of him, and he could be filled with new and everlasting life. This is what he was promised.

“The key to being a good mason is patience,” Joseph said with his nose in his work. “Did you hear me, Jesus?”

He heard the words, but he couldn’t believe that he was hearing them. In a breath, Jesus had gone from the grieving house of adulthood to those playful hours in the workshop—from a stool that was too low, to one that wouldn’t permit his feet to touch the ground.

“I said, did you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. Patience.” The words tumbled through his lips just as they had all those years ago in that same high-pitched timbre that he used to own.

Every now and then, Jesus stood on his tip-toes to view Joseph’s work space. He watched the steady hands pass back and forth along a grey stone until it was smooth. When his neck got tired from stretching up, he would sit down in the dust, stacking discarded pebbles until they fell.

“Oftentimes, when I'm carving a stone, I want the work to go faster. I'm tempted to use the biggest chisel I have, so I can get paid sooner. But do you know why I choose not to do this?”

Jesus looked up from where he sat on the floor. In each hand he held a chipped stone, scraps from his father's work. “Because you don't want the stone to crack?”

“That's right,” Joseph said. “That's exactly it. If I'm building something and the stone cracks, I have to start all over.” He straightened his back and wiped his forehead. “And if I'm repairing something and it breaks...” He arched his eyebrows. “Well, you don't make a whole lot of money that way.” He smiled. “In the long run, patience is much more valuable.”

Just then, an adolescent James came running into the work area with a hand full of tools. “Finished!” he said. “Everything is sharpened and cleaned, just like you asked, Father.” James dropped the bundle on the work bench. “I did it faster than ever!”

Joseph walked over to inspect the hammers and chisels that were now scattered about.

“Now can I help shape the stone, father?” James asked.

“James,” Joseph said, “why would you come running with all of them at once? The tools will dull one another, or you could have dropped them, or worse, you could have hurt yourself.”

“I just...”

“And why sling them all here in a pile instead of putting them in their place?”

“I wanted to...”

“Jesus, tell your brother what we were just talking about.”

Jesus looked up from his makeshift toys. “If you are not patient,” he said, “then you will crack the stone.” He smiled earnestly at Joseph and then at his brother.

James didn't smile back.

“Why aren't you weaving baskets with Leah and your mother?” James asked.

“Because I asked him to help me,” Joseph retorted. He put his hand on James's shoulder. “In your hurry you have scuffed some of the tools. Now you must do your job again.”

James's face contorted like he was about to argue.

“NOW,” Joseph continued, “you see how hurrying is often slower than taking your time. Go and do it again.”

“This isn't fair!”

“Do not make me say it again, son.” He stepped away from the bench and said in a lower voice. “I do not wish to raise my fist at you.”

James pouted and collected the tools to take them back to where he sharpened and cleaned them.

“Jesus,” Joseph said, “Maybe you should go check to see if your mother has everything she needs for supper.

“Yes, sir,” he said. And the boy went into the house.

But in the house everything was vibrating. As Jesus passed over the threshold, he found himself entrapped once more in the black box of grief. Every mourner and every object quivered in the cold air. Jesus looked down at his nearly blue feet and his own shaking hands.

“Please,” his sister said, “drink something at least.” Leah handed him a little clay cup. “You’re upsetting Mother.”

Jesus looked over to Mary, in her same spot, her face still red from crying, and he looked back at his sister. Her face floated in a fog, and her black curls rolled like smoke from beneath her headdress. Jesus took the cup and studied it; he could swear that he saw fingerprints on it, in it. He felt the grooves in the clay where Joseph’s hands had been, and he felt the warmth of those hands. When the water hit his stomach, it splashed in a hollow void: the third day of shiva. Time was moving extremely fast and incredibly slow all at once. Patience would be the only thing to get him through this.

But when his ears started to function once more, Jesus heard many of the mourners and neighbors laughing behind him. Laughing at him? Laughing about Joseph? Laughing at all? He turned his head and saw a group of men telling stories and gesticulating, sharing wine and *laughing*. Jesus stood up fast from his childhood stool, too fast, and his weak legs buckled from under him.

“Jesus?” said Leah, “what’s the matter? Are you all right?”

He gripped his right knee, trying to stir the blood back into his limbs. In a hoarse groan, he said “Get out.”

Had it really happened this way? Or was he just imagining it so?

Many of the people stared at him now and the crowd began to hush. When Jesus stood, he hobbled over to the men in the corner and cleared his throat. “Get out! Get out of this house, I said!”

The men all looked at each other, and then looked to James, expecting an answer, but all of them were quiet.

“I said LEAVE!” Jesus started to nudge their shoulders and push them to the door. “Get out of here.”

“But, Jesus, we—“

“Go!” Jesus turned only to stumble down to the lower room. He needed to be away from those vultures and his weeping mother. He needed a peace that he could not find. When alone in the lower room, he pulled at his tangled beard and slammed his hands against the floor. Kneeling down, breathing like an animal before a charge, he tried to calm himself, but hot tears burned streaks down his cheeks and upset him all the worse. “Lord,” he said with clenched hands, “I do not have the strength to bear this.” Jesus squeezed his eyes tight and clenched his teeth. “I have wicked thoughts...angry thoughts.” He breathed in deep and sighed. “Please...Lord, I can’t do this on my own.”

In a few moments, Jesus’s body relaxed, the muscles in his face loosened, and he was reminded of the only other time he had been so enraged. With his eyes closed, Jesus could feel his body form into the one he wore when he was a boy of ten or eleven. He felt his eyes widen when James asked if he would like to help him find some olives. His heart raced as he and the older boys ran to Nathan’s Grove and he remembered how his stomach jumped when James asked him to climb the tree. But then Jesus felt the sting of the first few stones, the sear of the tree branches as he fell, and the impact of the rocky dirt on the other side of the fence. His ears burned when he remembered that same laughter he had heard upstairs and he tasted the venom of that awful word they kept chanting...*bastard...bastard*.

Mary had already bathed his body and wiped away any dried blood while he was asleep. Young Jesus was wrapped in a thick hide twice his size and sweating through it. Vision or no vision, dream or no dream, he was sweating again. He could feel it all pouring and pouring from his skin.

Mary touched his forehead and said, “Oh, I hope you're not running a fever.” She grabbed his cheeks and peeled back his eyelids. Jesus just squirmed and tried to avoid her prodding as best he could. Mary smiled and said, “Praise be to the Lord our God and His son! Blessed be this child, son of the Lord our God. Praise Him.” She kissed his face and hands.

“Momma,” Jesus tried to interrupt.

“Blessed be the Lord our God—”

“Mother,” he said. “I'm tired.” The child turned over on his side and pulled down the heavy blanket.

Mary stopped her exaltations, paused a moment, and embraced her son once more before leaving the room.

Not too long after, Joseph stepped in softly and sat next to the bruised child. Jesus was on his side and not facing him.

“Jesus,” Joseph said, “we need to talk about what you have done today.”

The child remained on his side, but Joseph knew he was listening. He always listened.

“Why did you want to trespass today on the land of our neighbor? And why would you want to steal from him who has taken nothing of ours?”

Jesus stayed silent on his side, even when Joseph pulled the pelt back far enough to reveal the welts from tree branches and the shining bruises from the blind shepherd's hook.

"James has been punished for what he has done." Joseph leaned back in his seat and took his hand away from Jesus. "He was supposed to keep you safe," Joseph said, "but, instead, he put you in danger." After a moment, the words "I'm sorry he hurt you" floated in the air.

Jesus said something with his face buried in the blanket.

"Face me when you speak, please."

Jesus turned slowly on the bedding, each turn rubbed against a different wound, each shift hit another bruise. "It was the first time," he said with wet eyes. "He'd never called me *brother* before." Tears rolled down the child's cheeks and he sniffled into the sheets.

"Jesus... of course he's your brother, and I'm sure he loves you."

The child was crying louder now from one pain or the other. "Why do I have to be a bastard?" he said.

The shock was chiseled into Joseph's face.

"I don't want to be a bastard anymore." Jesus wiped the tears away and sat up on the bed inch by inch. His face twisted with every wrong movement. "Can't I just pretend *you* are my father?"

Joseph's eyes widened as he looked upon the whimpering child, covered in fresh marks, drenched in sweat and tears. "Jesus," he said. "I *am* your father. And you are my son!" He threw his arms around Jesus and repeated, "You are my son..."

And at that moment, something strange happened—while Jesus rested his head on Joseph's shoulder, while his eyes were glazed with tears, his insides started to grind, and a burning pressure swelled in his gut. Joseph thought his son was shaking from crying or from the pain, but he was shaking with a rage a child should not have to know. So Joseph embraced him tighter, and Jesus grimaced as his wounds and ire were clamped together forever.

The rip in the collar of his tunic was wider now and extended to his breast. While he was praying in the lower room, Jesus must have torn the cloth further than it had been. It would have to be mended in a few days. But for now, everyone's garments were torn, everyone had ashes and dirt in their hair and face, and everyone's head was covered. The sun would not shine upon their house for another three days. It was already too dark to see in the little half-cellar, and Jesus supposed he had been down there long enough. When he came up the few stairs, he saw that the room was much emptier than it had been. Many dishes were still on the table all covered with cloth, but the neighbors had left.

"Nice of you to join us," James said from the corner. "Get tired of braiding your hair in the basement?" James had glaring eyes, but he was sitting still as a shadow in the dark.

Jesus looked at him but did not hear the words. Instead he moved towards his mother who was lying on her mat. Her body was rising and falling too quickly for sleep, so he sat down by her feet. In the darkened room, her eyes were candles, and her tears like melting wax, constantly dripping down her cheeks. "I'm sorry I yelled, Mother."

From behind them James scoffed and mocked his voice.

Mary did not stir or look at him, but not from anger. She was too tired to respond.

But Jesus only needed an ear for now.

“It’s just that,” he took a breath and looked to the floor, “they wouldn’t think me a fool if I could have saved him.”

Mary cocked her head to face her child, a bewildered stare stamped on her face.

“I prayed and I prayed, but nothing happened.” Jesus started to tear up again.

“Perhaps, maybe if I had sacrificed something greater. But I had nothing of value...and if I had known he was ailing...maybe I could have—”

With the quickness of a ghost, Mary shot up from her mat and clasped Jesus tighter than a memory. “Hush,” she said.

Sobbing violently now, Jesus said, “Why couldn’t I save him?” He choked and coughed and still repeated, “Why wouldn’t the Lord let me save him?”

Mary embraced him with a hug she hoped would silence him. She wanted desperately to be the cloth that stifled the flame, but the harder she squeezed him, the more Jesus cried. “Our Lord is just and our Lord is righteous, my child.” She rubbed his back and brushed his matted black hair. “If HE has seen fit to take my husband, then it is according to HIS will. And in this we must rejoice.”

Jesus cried and let his mother’s words of blind faith roll through his ears, never sticking, never settling. Nothing she could say would take away the fact that he failed to save the man who chose to be his father.

So he wept and wept until he floated in a river of his own tears, he floated and drifted and drowned in the cool salt water of sadness. And as he was sinking into the

depths, a darkness overcame him, darker and darker, until he recognized the darkness as familiar night. It was the night of Joseph's death.

The man who shouldn't look so old coughed a little. "Jesus? Are you there?"

"Here I am," he said, kneeling beside the mat.

Joseph was sweating and could barely open his eyes. His breathing was faint and shaky. "I'm glad, son. I'm glad."

"What can I do?" he asked.

Joseph just shook his head and held out his hand. Jesus took hold of it.

"Where is James?" Jesus whispered to his mother.

She looked over her shoulder and then leaned down to say, "He came to receive his father's blessing and he is gone now." Her eyes were angry but she stroked Jesus's hair to keep him calm.

"Jesus?" Joseph said. "I need to tell you something." He coughed a little more.

"No matter what you do," he said quietly, "you will always be my son." He took a deep breath and tried to finish his thought. "In whom I am well pleased," he said.

Pleased

Please

"Please, please wake up!" said a voice from out of the darkness. A voice that echoed far away from where Joseph weakened, withered, and finally breathed his last breath. "Please! Wake up," said the voice, a woman's voice.

Jesus opened his eyes in the moment when Leah was tearing down the black curtains. The dazzling sun came pouring in and burned his swollen eyes. Mary hovered over him, begging him still. “Please! Please wake up!”

“I’m awake, Mother. I’m here.” The flood of burning light passed through the room, banishing the shadows and burning the marrow of his bones until nothing was left to be seen. He could only hear his mother’s pleading voice, whining, warbling, screeching, and fading away.

Jesus took in a huge gasp of air and stumbled over the words, “I’m awake Mother, I’m here!” But he was screaming into the vacant dust. The smell of ash surrounded him and the cold lonesomeness of the desert invaded his body. Pushing his face from the dirt, Jesus felt the tight grip of the leather cording around his wrists, but he saw that he had been cut from the stakes. Pushing himself up from the ground, the muscles beneath his shoulders felt like they were ripping to shreds. “Help!” he cried out, but there was no one around to hear him.

The once raging bonfire was just a scorched spot of dirt, the once dark sky was now bearing down on him with furious heat, and the rocky caves encircling him were hollow.

Empty. The world was *empty*.

“Hello?” Every word was sand in his throat and every cry was a breath his lungs could hardly spare. “Master?” His words echoed through the lonely open crags and reverberated off the still rocks. On his skin Jesus felt a coating of sweat or oil—he couldn’t tell which—and a layer of dust encasing him. He was wrapped in the film of a

slipshod burial. Tabhach and the men who swore to be his brothers were gone. All had abandoned him.

Trying to catch his breath, Jesus attempted to stand. But he stumbled and fell, grinding his face into the ground that stunk like bitter herbs and rotten potions. The wounds curving down his back, those burning slices outlining his spine, were forcing him to the dirt as if he were driven into the earth with nails. Gravity was pinning him to the grave.

Lying in the sand, crippled by pain, Jesus tried to reach a stiff and swollen hand to his aching back. First, his right hand to his right side. What he could feel was a slick and shining scar that arced from deltoid to rib, only spotted with bits of dried blood. Then, with his left hand, he tried to reach over his shoulder to the matching wound. But he couldn't. Every muscle twitch and every stretch of scabbing skin was too much. He tried to fish the hand around the side of his body and arch himself, but he could barely scrape the mark with the nail of his index finger. He used his right arm and, being a little more limber on that side, stretched his thumb to the scar. Under the skin of the digit he felt raised and puffy flesh, swollen and aching with jiggling boils and blisters. What little patch of skin he could reach was cracked, split, and oozing still, and just the thought of touching it made him grimace.

He started to imagine what these things looked like and it made his stomach convulse. Suddenly, a hot rush of blood flooded his veins, and panic set in. Every grain of sand was a spur and every stirring breeze was a solar flare. Drenched in sweat and blood, Jesus struggled again to his knees and tried to stand once more. Falling and buckling, he kept spastically twitching and turning until his motion resembled walking. It was like he

was being pulled from the womb all over again—his mind was aging too quickly for his body. Staggering the distance from the camp to the well that he helped dig, Jesus was dead-set on finding water to cool his guts. Pulling the pail up the shaft was like pushing the heavens around the firmament, his limbs quivering with every tug of the rope. When the bucket surfaced, it was only about a quarter full, and the water was darker than the soaked wood. But he splashed some in his face and swallowed as much as he could stomach. The taste of limestone and manure saturated his palate, and Jesus gripped the edge of the stone well to vomit. Spitting sediment and bug husks from his tongue, Jesus felt his skin heat up even more. So he dropped the bucket and endured the task of lifting it once more, this time to only rinse the taste from his gums and splash his body with the cool liquid. It turned to steam before it could do any good.

He was going to die here.

Just as alone as he started, just as confused and desperate as he started. So he tried to run like all men try to run, as far away from their own tombs as their feet can take them. And maybe it was the sun beating down on his brow, maybe it was the infection seeping deeper and deeper into his bloodstream, or maybe it was the lingering effects of the herbal magic of the Essenes, but Jesus could not feel himself in the present moment. Instead, he thought of that night in Nazareth, the night after the seventh day of shiva, the night when, once again, he was running for his life.

Traveling through the dark, stumbling, falling, Jesus wandered through the cold dust, hoping to trip over his destiny. After years of study and faith and good intentions, his father was dead and he, the would-be Rabbi, was a failure. So Jesus kept running and

walking, running and walking until his ankles were wet, and the light of a new dawn shone upon the shores of the Jordan. No one was around then so Jesus prayed. And these were the words that were with him still:

“Lord, I am lost,” he said. “From my youth I have only wanted to serve you, but I don't know how.” The air was still and the waters calm and quiet. “Is this the way? Is this what you want from me?” Jesus looked to the morning sky to no avail. The world was still asleep. He took a deep breath and saw his reflection in the water. A tanned man of dark features looked back from the ripples. Jesus wasn't exactly large or handsome, but certainly was not plain. His dark-rimmed eyes and prematurely wrinkled forehead had a way of leaving an impression. “Lord, you are my heavenly Father, the only one I have left, and I need you to guide me. Your sacred name is the only house I can lay claim to now. I seek only to do your will, to restore your kingdom and your people.” The air and the water were still silent, and Jesus was pleading. “I know I have sinned, I have had impure thoughts and done things that...” he sighed. “I ask only for forgiveness. And by your mercy I try to forgive those who have offended me. Please, Father, protect me from temptation, and deliver me from the evil of this world.” Jesus had his eyes shut tight. The river's waters splashed against his knees. “Yours is the only power,” he said. “You are the only Father, the only ruler.” He paused and said a little louder, almost with desperation, “Yours is the only kingdom. Now and forever, this is what I believe.” Tears swelled in his eyes. “This is what I believe!”

The water, the ground, the brush, the sky, and the animals all stayed silent, slumbering, but there was one voice crying out in the wilderness. “You speak well!” he said.

Jesus, a little startled, turned around to see the ragged prophet, John the Baptizer. “You scared me,” he said.

“Oh!” John always shouted. “Do not be afraid for, as I have just heard, you are a child of our Lord. And HE, your only father, HIS is your only household.” John moved closer to Jesus, wild-eyed and theatrical. “Why have you come here? To these waters?”

Jesus looked around and noticed a few of John's followers were not far behind, watching. “I have seen you,” he said. “I've seen you here, baptizing and preaching your message. You speak of eternal purification, of the corruption in the temple, of the virtues of the poor.” Jesus stood and moved towards John. “And I believe in what you are doing.”

Many of John's followers moved from beyond the brush and came closer to the two men who now circled one another—wild animals measuring each other's stature inch by inch. “So you have heard that whoever is baptized by me in HIS waters will be cleansed of all sins until the end of days—and this you believe.” John looked out at his followers and then to the water. When he looked back to Jesus, his eyes were something starry, something eerie. “Have you also heard then that there is one who is coming, one who will baptize with holy FIRE?”

Jesus nodded with hesitation. “I have heard you say that...that the Messiah is among us.”

“He is near and he is coming!” screamed John. He ran into the waters and started splashing around like a madman. “He is near and he is coming!”

A voice from the crowd yelled out, “Praise be our Lord who has sent us this holy prophet.”

Another voice shouted, “Blessed be!”

Jesus studied the crowd and the man they were praising. John was doing backstrokes in the river and floundering around like an epileptic, but Jesus saw something more than emphatic fervor. He saw a man abandoned to truth. And he felt a burning in his chest as he remembered the words of the scriptures. “Do you all not see?” he proclaimed. “This man is no mere prophet—he foretells the coming of the messiah in earnest! Surely this is as Isaiah foretold, this man is the voice crying out in the wilderness. Surely this baptizer is Elijah, the prophet who escaped death, returned!” As the words bubbled up from his lips, Jesus tasted his praises. He wanted so desperately for them to be rich and full, but they were sour.

The crowd stood stunned, waiting for something. A sign, a word, an answer.

From the flowing river came the voice of John, spitting and spouting the waters through his mouth and nose. “You bestow titles upon me which I have not earned.” He stood up in the shallow waters, dripping and glistening. “I am not worthy to serve the Messiah; to remove his sandals or bow at his feet.”

“Your humility has blinded you,” Jesus shouted out to him. “But I see you truly.” Jesus took small steps into the cold waters. “I see that you are the Lord’s servant, and I see what you have done. I know I was sent here to find you.” Jesus kept walking through the water until his robes billowed up to the surface—he kept walking until everything below his waist was numb, until he stood next to John.

John studied the young man's face, the severe look in his eyes, the fervor buried in his skin. “Brothers!” he shouted. “Today I bathe a new servant in the waters of the LORD!” With paws for hands, John clenched Jesus by the nape of his neck and scooped

an arm under his lower back. Without warning, he thrust Jesus deep into the river once, twice, three times according to tradition.

When Jesus was submerged the first time, he felt the hard impact, the cold shock of the water on his skin.

When Jesus was submerged the second time, he felt a rush of blood through his limbs and to his head. A shining hope coursed through his veins, and an excitement splashed about his body.

When Jesus was submerged the third time, he felt only a cold, dark, silence. One that mirrored a truth he was too afraid to speak aloud. The abyss inside his soul was ever-growing—it was a void that no amount of holy water could completely fill.

Splash!

That same water from all those years ago fell from the sky, a holy anointing liquid, and smacked across the skin of his face.

“Ah! What? Where am I?” Jesus looked up at the shining sky and only saw vultures circling. Only after a few moments did he notice the tiny man beside the trail, his hands trembling around a wine skin. “Hello? Do you speak my language, friend?”

The frail old nomad stared at Jesus but did not move.

Jesus’s body was stiff and it took some time to sit up. It took even longer to stand. When he did, he saw that the old man was traveling with a cart and an ox. “Where are we?” Dust poured out of Jesus’s mouth instead of words.

The old man said nothing still, but with a shaking arm he pointed to the dirt of the road.

“What is it old man?” Jesus stepped towards him but the man stepped back in trepidation, his hand still pointing.

Jesus looked to the roadside and saw a brown and purple arc painted in the mud. It was the imprint of some heavenly being, some fallen angel whose wings were obliterated upon impact, plumage disintegrated by the fall. He did not understand. Looking back to the old nomad, he saw a twisted expression of horror on his face. The man was staring at Jesus’s back. That’s when Jesus reached behind him, stretching his arm as far as it could reach, only to pull back a hand full of fresh blood and pus. The wound had opened up again.

Staring at his hand imbued with gore, Jesus started to watch his vision cross. He tried to call out to the old man a single word—

Help...

But all that left his lips was a moan of pain and fear.

All of creation was a jostling cradle, bouncing over river-rapids and rattling in mangers, a blinding light from a place you can’t reach, the passing dust of rocky cliffs forever whittling themselves into something smaller and smoother, and the constant drip of sticky red. Dripping on the forehead to make you blink and know that you’re still alive, dripping from your skin to make you cry and know you’re still alive. Everything was yellow, a formless glowing. This life was shimmering and shifting on too small a scale to see, but every time he opened his eyes, he saw a world completely changed from the one in which he fell asleep. But once he felt the warming balm and smelled the frost-minty fragrance of shadows, he knew that the mold had cooled, and the earth was

finished transforming. He knew that when those hands left his skin, and when his crystal vision returned, he would awake into the life he was supposed to inhabit.

The buzzing blur of words flowed through the tent.

Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me...

The lyrics flowed and bathed his body, not like those harsh words chanted in the past, the ones that bruised and broke him. Jesus's eyes opened, but his body remained still. His skin and muscles were too comfortable, the fur beneath his belly was soft and warm, and a gentle morning tingle massaged his deeper tissues.

The low-toned melody coursed through the air again as if in tune with the breeze.

Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me...

Jesus stretched as slowly as he could without moving his posture. The muscles in his neck tightened and released, his toes wriggled and popped at the joints, and a soft yawn filled his chest. And with it, a light burn inside his lungs. This is when he remembered, the blood, the nomad, the visions...

But he did not stir, for he was petted and soothed by the melody.

Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me... Om Nashi Me...

As the last syllable trailed off and sank into his skin, the holy voice concluded with the deep and vibrating *Om*, a note that he held long enough to confuse the silence of the universe. In this moment, Jesus felt his heart-beat strengthen—not faster or slower than before, but more vigorous. And he felt a clarity in his mind that one can only achieve after a peaceful sleep.

But just as he was about to force himself from his mat, the voice, as if reading Jesus's thoughts, said, "Do not move... rest."

And Jesus obeyed the tranquil command like the sands obey the ebb of a saltwater caress. His eyes rested low on the floor and his vision was half-impeded by the bushy fur of the mat. What he could see was that he was in an unfamiliar tent, one glowing with the warmth of a small fire. And behind this fire rested a pair of rail-thin legs, painted with brown smooth leather, and capped with tiny brown feet. The first thing to leak from his mouth was a question for the waving toes across the room. "Where am I?"

Jesus could not see it, but he heard a smile curl on the man's face. "You are here with me." And the tent rested again, breathing in the peace of the morning.

Jesus said to the dark brown feet, "And who are you, friend?"

A pause this time, the man's answer rode on smoke that poured out of his lungs, "Friend is good. I try to be a friend."

Jesus was still too calm to be perturbed. He was floating on the wave of the unfamiliar smoke and still grasping at the thought of being so alive. "Well, do you have a name?"

Just then the room was the flapping of wings and the shot of the first comet striking the earth. The man pushed at the tarp of his home with the boom of laughter. "Haha! Of course not. Why would I own something so useless?" At this, Jesus was awake, and much too curious to lie still. He tried to push himself up again and heard the rustling of another body. "Oh, don't do that," said the man. "Here, let me help you." And Jesus felt a mother's hand behind his neck and the clasp of silk around his waist. The man he could still not see turned him over on one side and placed a pillow beneath his head.

From behind Jesus's back he said, "Now don't move any more than that for now. It's time for your balm anyway."

Jesus watched as the shadows on the canvas flickered and flowed, slithered and circled. The man's arms were serpents, reaching their mouths into a dish and then sliding their wet tongues across the skin of his back. Jesus watched the motions intently and, with the same faithful eyes of his ancestors, knew that he was being healed by the mercy of the Lord.

"I have a name," Jesus offered in a hushed tone. He was tranquilized by the scent of thyme and the smooth glide of aloe. "I was going to have two names."

The man laughed again, this time very softly. "Why have two when one is too much trouble?"

"I was born Jesus, named for Joshua, the great warrior. And I was to be called Ze'ev, the wolf."

"Here," said the man, "eat these slowly." An oily hand placed a small dish of seeds in front of Jesus. "Ajwain and fennel will help you more than talking."

So Jesus used his free hand, the one that wasn't pinned underneath his side, and ate a few of the pungent seeds at a time.

After a while, the man finished rubbing in the salve and sat back to stare at the wounds. "And which of these name-givers was the butcher who saw fit to mutilate you? Your father who called you warrior? Or the ones who would call you Wolf?"

Jesus chewed another handful of seeds and said nothing. Memories of Tabhach and his disciples exploded one at a time as they came back to him from the haze of illness.

“I prefer sheep to wolves anyway,” the man said. “You can pet them longer before they bite you.”

Jesus chuckled a little, but it made his ribs sore.

“Better to be a lamb anyway,” said the old man as he walked back over to his original seat. “Their masters don’t maim them and leave them for dead. But no one would care about a bleeding wolf.”

Jesus could see the man clearly now, a bald and tooth-sparse ascetic. His matted black beard was long enough to disappear behind the flame in Jesus’s line of sight. It looked like a trail of smoke connecting the healer to the fire, like his body was constructed from ashy air spewing from a flue. He had the eyes that Joseph wore when he wanted to ask his sons *how could you be so stupid?*

“Thanks for the seeds,” is all Jesus could think to say.

“Mhmm.” The healer nodded.

Time passed and Jesus watched as the old man stared at him. Into him. Not eyes of judgment or condemnation, but ones that wanted to understand. Jesus closed his own eyes to avoid the gaze, but he still felt the glare digesting his soul. “I’ve been trying so hard,” he said, “for years and years now.” Still with his eyes closed, Jesus felt both his weather-beaten body’s resistance to and his pounding heart’s urge for one thing: confession. But instead he asked, “Why don’t you have a name?”

The man shook his head. He would not be swayed or distracted.

“Well, will you at least tell me how I got here?”

The old man curled his lips up and said, “One of those rotten Accadians lumped your body in the back of his ox-cart. You were a prisoner to his kindness, I suppose. Or

to something else.” The man raised his eyebrows in an arch of innuendo, but Jesus didn’t get the joke. “Ha! You must be a far-away stranger.”

Jesus smiled quiet and thought of how many steps his feet had taken in the past few years, how many miles and miles away he was from the breath or death of his mother--he had no way of knowing which one it might be. “I have come a long ways,” he said finally.

The man’s face sank back into stone, and he settled his glare onto Jesus once more, waiting for his words to flow through the cracks in his skin.

Jesus sighed. Every time he pressed his eyelids down, he could smell the spices of rosemary in the tent, and taste the foods of grief from Joseph’s shiva, and his stomach churned from the pangs of devouring itself in those many trials of fasting. “I just...” the words were moths swarming up his throat and he choked on them. “I just wanted to find something meaningful...something true. But every sage and hermit, every prophet and prescriber, every Rabbi that ever...” Jesus exhaled sharply and looked to the dirt. “None of them could fix me.”

A wet silence flooded the tent and Jesus was ashamed. For a long time he did not look towards his kind stranger, but when he did, Jesus’s stare was met with moist eyes and a trembling voice. The old man’s face sunk low as he asked, “Who told you that you were *broken*?”

The question or the tenor of innocence, one or the other, was too much for Jesus to bear. He clamped his eyes shut to hold back the hot tears. “I am impure!” he said in sharp staccato. “And I needed...I *need* cleansing to be worthy.”

“No...no,” the old man spoke softly, hushing the aching child, “no, you are pure enough. Pure as me or anyone else.”

“Then I am *hollow*,” Jesus said. “I have felt this myself, something is missing. Every day of my life I have to ask why I exist.”

The host waited a while for Jesus to calm down and reopen his ears. When his cries had subsided, the man said, “When a tree is hollow, the gardener does not chop and cut at it, he does not peel away the bark to reveal the darkness of the void.” The old man waited for Jesus to look at him again so he could gesture a slicing motion and nod. He waited to see if Jesus understood. “The healer does not reveal hollow things, he fills them. And only you can heal yourself.”

Jesus nodded like a juvenile tired of being reprimanded, so the old man quit speaking.

After many puffs of drowsy smoke spiraled out his nose, the stranger said, “The salve should be dry now. It’s best to bandage before you sleep again.” And without another word, the man stood and walked back behind Jesus to apply cloth wraps. He had to roll Jesus’s body onto the stomach as if he were paralyzed and then help lift him to kneeling.

Jesus felt the smooth motions of the healer’s hands once again and watched as they deftly slipped in front and around him, ever so delicately tying the tiny knots that would hold the dressings in place. “Why would you help me? I am no kin of yours; I do not even know where I am.”

The matter-of-fact genuine tone of the old man's response was striking. "Why shouldn't I help you? You are a man like me— born of the earth, deserving of love, giver of love, receiver of love..."

"I have nothing to pay you."

"I need nothing else." He said this as quickly as the cinch of the final knot.

"There, all done. You can lie back down if you like."

"No," Jesus said, "thank you, but I would rather stay like this."

The old man nodded and returned to his side of the tent while Jesus pawed at the last handful of seeds in his dish. In his new position, he could see his surroundings more clearly, although there wasn't much else to see. The canvas around him was bare of decoration, the two mats were plain, and the campfire was large enough to have a spit over it, but much too small to cook any meat. But, judging from the look of the old hermit, it didn't appear that he ate any more meat than Jesus.

The only striking detail about the place was the pile of clay dishes and pots and tiny bone instruments and twisted bits of metal that stacked up behind the old man. Many dishes and wicker baskets held plants and roots and herbs, and the pile held too many skins for them to all only contain wine. And beside the old man lay a satchel, a large leather bag from which he meticulously pulled and replaced his little bone pipe and dish of dried flower-buds.

"Is that how you have cured me?" Jesus nodded towards the pile of enchanted ingredients.

Sitting cross-legged with his fists resting on his inner thighs, the old man furrowed his brow at the question, thinking long before he spoke. After a while, he pulled

something from his bag and held it out. “This is a sharp knife. I use a whetstone on it every day, and I make sure it is very clean. I keep it in its place until I use it.” The man paused and nodded, waiting for a response.

Jesus nodded back, waiting.

“The Spirit cleanses and heals, *I* cleanse and heal, but without the Spirit and without me, the knife does nothing.” On the last word, he held his hand out and dropped the blade to the ground. It made a thud against his mat. “Do you understand? The knife is not good or evil, helpful or hurtful, cleansing or killing, until commanded. The same is true for everything you see behind me.”

Jesus looked down into the fire, sorry he asked anything at all.

“So, no,” the man said after a pause. “These things are tools, but they are not how I have healed you.” He picked up his knife and started to wipe away its blemishes. “I have healed you with my faith and with my knowledge.”

Jesus thought for a while, trying to conjure everything he’d ever been taught.

“And what animal did you sacrifice? I owe you at least that. I will work to buy you back your calf.”

The old man’s eyes narrowed.

“You didn’t make sacrifice, did you?”

The healer shook his head.

“But I was always told that you must offer up blood to cleanse blood.”

“Were these teachers also the ones who dragged their rusting swords across your back?” His tongue lashed brighter than any stinging whip.

Jesus lowered his head.

“I’m sorry,” said the old man, “that was rude of me. What you speak of is common enough. But it’s not always true.” The healer took a deep breath and said, “Sometimes you must offer blood. But sometimes, all you need to offer is compassion.”

Jesus looked back at the man’s now more softened face.

“What you have seen,” said the old man, “is nothing but fool’s magic, steeped in idle ceremony. This is not the work or gifts of God.”

Jesus felt a rush of blood to his feet and hands, and a surge of hope clatter across his bones. “Teach me,” he said. “Please, teach me to heal like you.”

“Ha!” The old man opened his mouth wide in a smile. “Normally, people offer thanks for one favor before demanding the next. But you are a persistent one, aren’t you? Not like those others.”

“I’m sorry,” Jesus said with flushed cheeks, “I owe you my life. And I thank you immensely. But I know this is why I was brought here.” Jesus pushed against the mat as hard as he could, trying to sit up. “I know that this is where I’ve been pulled to since my days in Galilee.” He struggled, but the pain was too much. He collapsed back to his side, bellowing out a cloud of breath. “Please!”

The old man stood up slowly and turned away without a word. He began to rummage through his many dishes and baskets, searching for something. From over his shoulder, he said, “Desire does not always produce good will. How can I know how you will use your knife?” With that the old man turned to shoot a cocked eyebrow at his companion.

Jesus waited for his tongue to conjure the right words. “If you are a man of faith then you will know the Lord will send you a sign that I come truly, and that I come from Him alone.”

The old man continued to prod and poke through his pile. “Oh, signs are pigshit.” He placed his hand on a small ceramic dish and lifted the lid. “Ahh...here it is.”

As the healer moved back closer to the fire, Jesus could see that the dish contained pale-yellow, cylindrical flowers. It also held short, leafy stems and chopped, dried bits. “I believe much more in what you might call...tests of the spirit.” The man pinched a few handfuls of the dried leaves into a cup of water dangling over the fire.

Jesus would not be shaken. “I’ll do whatever it takes to learn.”

The healer giggled to himself. “You don’t learn lessons easily, do you? That’s all right, I admire a hard head.” He stirred the contents of the cup with one of the leafy stems, then broke the tiny green tube. From it oozed a milky white fluid that puffed up thick steam when it hit the boiling water. After he had finished concocting, the old man fished the cup from the spit, wrapped it in a cloth, and walked it over to his guest. “All you have to do is drink this, and I will know what I need to know.”

Jesus took the warm cup and looked inside. “What is it?”

“Tea.”

Jesus examined the smiling face of his host closely. “But what is that?” He pointed to the clay dish and its contents.

“Those are ingredients.” The old man laughed a deep roar. “It’s called opium lettuce, and it is a true gift from nature. Now drink up—if it cools it won’t help us.” The man sat on Jesus’s mat with him in his familiar posture.

As Jesus forced the bitter liquid down his gullet, he was soothed by that same song as before.

Om Nashi Me...Om Nashi Me...

With half the cup down and his gums throbbing, Jesus asked, “And what is that you sing?”

The old man responded only with his refrain of *Om Nashi Me...*

Jesus inhaled deeply and turned the rest of the steaming tea into his mouth to swallow. He set the cup down on the waving floor. “And another thing,” he heard himself say, “just what exactly is your *name*?”

The melody of *Om Nashi Me* wove its way through the current of the present, but the old cleric, the shifting wizard, now stood in front of Jesus. Still-mouthed, reaching with coiling arms, he smoothed Jesus’s body to the mat, stomach down, like he was making a bed. When all the wrinkles were rubbed away, the old man leaned down close to Jesus’s face until the two were nearly cheek-to-cheek. He moved his lips as if to answer the floating question, but the sound that came from them was the sizzle of a pasture after a strong gust.

Soon the whole world was this sound and the dry kiss of manly lips upon his forehead, the brush of scraggly beard across his face. And even though Jesus’s eyes were to the pillow, he could see through the back of his skull, he could see the pinnacle of the tent twist off and disappear, he could see as seven doves and seven ravens circled the opening to the sky in alternate directions until the sun’s rays carried a gray-feather blaze into his ethereal sphere of vision. He was no longer falling into the pit of ghosts and forgotten laughs, but he was rising, pulled by a golden thread into the divine portal.

He blinked and the grey bled black. Swirling darkness enfolded Jesus like his mother's robes that day outside Capernaum's city gates. It shielded him from the rebel corpses, propped up on stakes and crosses, decorating the Roman walls. His childish eyes were blind to their dripping hands and sunken throats, but not to the stench of rotting flesh and shit-stained dangling ankles, not to the rustling sounds of those steadfast unlucky few, still wriggling, still writhing.

He blinked and the black bled amber, the deep yellow of fermented honey. And there was no moving, no breathing, no screaming. Clamped neck, body encased, petrified, fossilized in a yellow gemstone, a frozen bug preserved in crystal. Crashing through his jewel-prison-tomb, a shining white hand.

He blinked and the amber bled gaseous-white, a sharp pull on his long hair, a hand that's not his mother's, more immediate, yanking him higher, higher, upward-rising float. Until smoke and nothing smoked, smoke and nothing smokes, incense for floor and ceiling, perfumed ringing coils of dancing-dodging-smoke all around.

And every voice that had ever spoken chanted the simple words—

Holy...Holy...Holy...

Jesus wanted to run, but he was suspended in the air by that phantom limb. His frame quivered like skin rolled in snow, but felt increasingly warm. A shade approached from the distant haze. As he came closer, Jesus recognized the murky figure as his healing stranger, the man with no name, and he had something glowing in his right hand. It was the orange of not knowing sunset from sunrise, like the old man's face behind the burning coals of the fire, behind the ember of his pipe.

As he moved closer, Jesus saw that the healer's was the only mouth moving, his was the only voice resounding with—

Holy—

His teeth glowed silver and a forked tongue slithered from his mouth. His eyes were turned on their sides and beamed yellow like a cat's.

Holy—

Every inch of his body was illuminated—orange fire, snake skin. And around his sides were six wings, three on each side. Not feathery or leathery, but like mist, like they would pass right through you.

Holy!

Jesus tried to scream again, thrashing, pulling against the hand clenching his scalp, but he only swung in place, spider's-prey-in-web hanging for the trickster-priest to devour him. The old cleric stood right in front of Jesus now, walking on nothing but a dark haze, and without saying a word, raised the glowing ember to his face. Twisting and squirming, Jesus wanted to be free, to wake up, to escape. But, despite all the panic and frenzy, the old man grabbed his chin and pressed the burning rock to his lips. Jesus heard the pop of grease in a fire and tasted the gooey sugar of a raw fat dipped in stale blood. And when his lips were melted down, the wraith-hand released his hair. Body plummeted, but soul rose—clay being kneaded and pulled apart—down and up through miles and miles of darkness, the endless well, until finally another splash. A pool of water and hissing steam.

Flash

Jesus shot up from his mat, leapt from his stomach like a springing frog and screamed, silencing his own yelping with his hoping hands. He clutched his face to make sure it was all still there. And then, as quickly as he jumped, he fell back to his knees. His insides condensed themselves into a single tumor.

The old man had not left Jesus's side, and now he was at the ready with a slop-pot held in front of his face. "Here," said the healer, "get it out and you'll feel better."

Jesus, still vibrating from the electric blood in his veins, leaned over the pot as best he could and retched while the old man petted the nape of his neck and rubbed his shaking head with calm strokes.

When Jesus was empty and calming down, the old man said, "I have seen what I needed to see." His face was a wide and beaming grin. "If you are still so sure, we will begin in the morning. For now you sleep."

Jesus slumped down to his mat and pressed his aching stomach into the cushion. With his head on its side he looked up to his caretaker. "How..." the words were stinging blood.

"Shhh..." said the old man. "Everyone thinks dreams and visions are so private. But the truth is you only need to know where to look." Again his face was a proud and unhindered smile.

Jesus stared up at the face flickering in the fire-light. He saw those eyes that flashed a deep yellow and wanted to be afraid. But Jesus was much too glad that he finally woke up without being alone. Before his eyes drooped, Jesus noticed a red thumbprint in the center of the old man's forehead. And before his mind drifted into sleep, he forced his chattering teeth to let one whisper pass through. "Thank you..."

The next morning was the embrace of blue-light mists in the world without a sun. Jesus, his wounds now a tolerable enough pain to stand and walk, followed the healer through the hills outside his tent. His instructions were clear: Jesus was to point to any flowers, fungi, trees, vines, fruits, or animals he could not identify. But he could only point and listen. So they walked steadily upwards, trekking through rocky soil, in and out of greener thickets. Jesus stopped and held out a silent hand towards one of the many tall trees surrounding them.

The old man stopped and studied the tree, picked some of its feathery leaves, scraped away a patch of its dark, fissured bark, then squatted close to the forest floor. In a hush, he whispered “This is the Prickly Acacia or Egyptian Thorn.”

Jesus moved his lips to make the shape of the new words but he made no sound.

“We use the sticky gum to bind essential oils, lotions, and poultices.” He held out the knife for Jesus to touch the sap. “This is what bound your salve and what helps hold your bandages despite your sweat.”

Jesus studied the piece of bark, the leaf, and the sap, all while unconsciously reaching a hand around to fidget with his bandage. “What else was in your medicine?” Jesus asked.

He must have spoken too loudly because the old man shushed him and said, “Quiet. We try to never wake the world while it’s dreaming.” And with that, the old man stood up, one controlled motion. He continued hiking up the path, higher into the hills, careful not to step on a single twig.

Jesus lagged behind and stared upward at the thirty-foot tall tree. The leaves and branches were shaped into a spherical crown, almost as if by a gardener, and the foliage sat atop Jesus's head with a perfect fit. But in the half-light of the approaching dawn, Jesus saw the thin shadows of the thorns that laced themselves through the brush. They rested above him, razor-sharpened raindrops momentarily suspended. Jesus retreated before the darts had a chance to fall and pierce his brow.

As the two men walked on, the taller trees fell back and gave way to shorter bushes, barren patches of dust, and wildflower beds. Jesus pointed once again in silence, afraid to stir the universe. And again, the old man stepped softly to a cluster of white flowers growing one on top of the other. He picked two short bunches that looked identical to Jesus.

"One of these," he whispered, "is invaluable. And one is infinitely poisonous." The old man flashed a wicked smirk at Jesus. "Care to guess which is which?"

Jesus's eyes were wide. He just shook his head slowly.

"Good boy." He held his left hand out. "This is cow parsley." He crushed up the flowers between his thumb and forefinger and smeared it across Jesus's collarbones. "Keeps mosquitoes off you like nothing else." The old man tossed the spent plant aside and held up the other in his right hand. "This is fool's parsley. Rub it on like that and your skin burns off. Eat it and you die." He tossed the handful away and rose.

Jesus couldn't help but think that if he had been forced to choose, he would now be dead. But he couldn't entertain the thought for long because the old man was on the move again, stepping over the parsley, to a small depression shadowed by a crumbling rock shelf.

“Now this,” whispered the healer, “is a find!” Even he had trouble controlling his voice as he held up a white star-shaped flower with a pupil-black center. He reached his nimble fingers to the dark tips of the tentacle stamens and plucked the seeds from the end. “My guru called this black cumin. The Arabs here call the nigella seed *khazha* and they have a saying about it.” The old man held the tiny seeds closer to Jesus. “*Khazha* cures every disease except for death.” The healer’s face was beaming with pride and a hint of nostalgia.

Jesus nodded at the information, but his thoughts were centered more on the strange word the old man had said. Not *khazha* or anything about the flower’s seeds, but the word *guru*. He wanted to ask, but decided to wait until he knew he was allowed to speak. Instead he watched and listened as the old man pointed to the occasional wild pear, demonstrated how the Puschkinia tulip can be identified by its cerulean stripe, and told the story of how the *Anastatica* got the name *Jacob’s Rose*.

When they hiked up to the summit plateau, and the desert soil was too dry for even the resurrecting tumble-weed, the old man sat in his cross-legged pose to look out across the landscape. He gestured for Jesus to join him and mimic his posture.

Jesus sat and tried to force his stiff legs to bend like the healer’s. His knees burned from the strain and he felt the scars on his back throb with every breath. But all of that disappeared, burned up in the scorch of the morning sun, and was swept away by the breeze of *Om Nashi Me*. And without being told to, without being asked, Jesus moved his lips in time with the old man’s, the two of them serenading the morning with the kiss of song.

“Thyme, aloe, and Balm of Gilead,” said the old healer. The hill plateau had been so quiet for so long, the peaceful mantra had long since sunk into the soil like morning dew, that Jesus forgot either of them might still be awake. Or alive.

“What?”

“These are the answers to your question. Thyme, aloe, and Balm of Gilead are what’s in your medicine.” The old man did not look at his new apprentice, but he studied the horizon as if he were trying to read its lips.

“Thank--”

“Do not thank me.” The old man cut him off without raising his voice. “You don’t thank a bird for flying or a fish for swimming, so please, do not thank me for doing what I was made to do.”

For a while, Jesus sat and stared, watching the flat expanse, waiting for life to flutter past on wings. “I do thank the bird,” he said.

The old man broke his stare and turned to look at what he thought was a boy. And for the first time that morning, he laughed that roaring laugh and showed the happy gaps where his front teeth should be. “Haha!” echoed and rolled through the world, and the creatures heard it and laughed with him. The breath of air inhaled his laughter and it laughed with him, and the whole place smelled of joy.

Like the rest of nature, Jesus couldn’t help himself—he contracted the humor infection. And like anyone else who saw the old man’s wrinkles make his eyes collapse, and like anyone else who felt the happy-punching vibrations, he laughed too. It was the first time since he left home that he felt the free and lawless release of laughing until his stomach ached.

When he could speak again, the old man said, “Sometimes I forget that the most beautiful lessons can come from children.”

Jesus's face started to twist in defense.

But before he could retort, the old man said, “We all need to try and become children again instead of trying to become old goats.” He drew a breath in deep to his chest and reclined, his palms in the dust. “Because then we wouldn't forget to thank the song-bird.”

Jesus smiled and copied the more relaxed posture. “Sir,” he said. The word sounded formal and stilted, and it added a foul air to the morning, but Jesus continued. “Earlier you said a word I have never heard.”

“Oh?”

“What is ‘guru?’”

The old man smiled and stared off into the nothingness for a while. Then he stood and pointed into the sun. “See over there?”

Jesus stood too and stared, his hand shielding his eyes. But he saw nothing.

“Look as far as you can and then look farther. I was once like you. I thought I had to find where the sun came from and ask it myself why it lights the world. And I made it as far as Persia.”

Jesus widened his eyes, unable to imagine going more than twice as far from home as he had already traveled.

“This is where I met my master, my guru. He taught me the ways of meditation, the medicine of Ayurveda, and the energy manipulation of those who lived closer to the

sun than he. Everything I know about life is because of that man whom I will always love.”

Jesus smiled. “I would like to travel there, and see that world, and meet this wise man.”

The old man turned away from the sunrise and looked to Jesus. “No you wouldn't.” His face was not the jovial floating light that it normally was. His mouth was a grave from whence dead men crept. “It took me a lot longer than it will take you to realize that all I was doing was running away.” The old man pointed to Jesus's skull. “Knowledge is here,” he said. And his finger slid down to the center of Jesus's chest. “Knowledge is here.” He nodded and waited before he turned back to the east and pointed to the distance. “Not out there.”

Jesus waited, but the old man did not turn back to face him. “Could I call you by this? Will you be my guru?”

A sharp inhale and twitch of shoulders. The old man coughed out the word, “No” as he turned to reveal wet eyes. “No,” he said again, “I am a doctor, a vaidya, and an old man. This is all.” He paced over to a new spot on the summit looking south. “I can teach you surgery and cleansing, and conjuring, but I can never teach you how to live. My feet are much too small to fill those sandals.”

Jesus felt a pang of pity, but a sensation of great admiration as well. He saw the luster of humility in every word that man had to offer. And with a loving defiance, Jesus bowed his head and said, “Yes, guru.”

The fizzing gurgle of the melting sky filled the silent void. The healer, half-turned away, rubbed at the corner of his eye with an ashy knuckle. He sighed and shook his head. "I want you to really see something now."

Jesus moved closer to him and looked across the land.

"A few miles down there, you see that?"

There was a lump in the desert, like the Earth had hiccupped, but Jesus could see it.

"Do you know what that place is?"

Jesus shook his head.

"This is where I go to work, where I give bodies a second chance. What you see in the distance is Babylon, or what's left of it."

Jesus stepped back as if the sight were contagious, but then he moved forward and peered out more precisely. All the stories he had heard from his elders, those of bondage and captivity, all the old songs of slavery he had heard sung in vineyards and in pastures, all these noises finally had a mouth that Jesus could see. If only he could spit that far.

"For generation after generation now that place has been ravaged by war and conquest. King after king covets the lasting legend of Nebuchadnezzar. And the once great city has fallen into ruin. Part battlefield, part quarry, the Parthians now seek to build a New Babylon from the bones of the old."

Jesus crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. "Good," he said with force. "You reap what you sow, and the Lord punishes those who assault his people."

"Maybe," said the guru. "Or maybe the Lord is waiting for us all to give up our grudges. That's my bet anyway." The old man stepped closer to the cliff. "It's easy to

believe that the Almighty wishes for us to be spiteful, but the easy thing is rarely the right thing. Do you understand?” He looked over his shoulder to Jesus.

Jesus, still with crossed arms, was hearing but he was not listening.

“I go down there and close up wounds, I relieve coughs and break fevers, and I help bury those whom I could not save. And I do all this in that dreadful place to remind myself that what I want and what the Lord wants for me are most always two different things.”

“But master,” Jesus said, “I have always been taught that war and sickness and plight are the punishments doled out by heaven. Aren’t these men the wicked ones deserving of plague?”

The guru did not turn to look at his student. “Haven’t you ever seen someone you love wracked with disease?” He turned to look at Jesus with a questioning glare.

Jesus felt his face tremble, and he looked to the ground to keep from crying. He saw the cracking and dusty face that Joseph wore in his final hours. “My father,” he said, choking on the memory.

The guru tried to catch his eyes but could not. “And did he *deserve* this plague from the Lord?”

Jesus did not answer with words, but his hands became fists and his body was a shaking mass. His bones quaked just shy of the fury of a ground-splitting fissure.

In a soft voice carried by the breeze the teacher said, “If you continue to see the afflicted as strangers or enemies then you will never help them. Healing, the purest servitude, can only happen when you stand close enough to see your reflection in their eyes.” He put a cool hand on Jesus’s shoulder and looked into the student’s raging eyes.

“Healing can only happen when there is love.” The guru stepped away to admire the horizon once more in peace.

Jesus thought over the words for a while and let them soak into his skin like the sunlight. After a long silence, he inched closer to his teacher and finally stood beside him, gazing out at the city in the distance.

“Standing here, in this moment, you are watching the world change. Do you know this? We are in the shaking of a grumbling transformation. Everyone with any sense can feel that the ground beneath their feet is trembling, shifting into something new. I have heard this in many nations, from many tribes. When I first left the Northern Kingdom all those years ago, I thought the Jews were just caught up in their own troubles with Rome. But they weren’t, they weren’t at all. The prophets and the ramblers all spoke of the same shuddering time as those in the East. I saw it then, and I feel it now. We are standing on a brink, toes dangling over the edge of an old and pregnant time.” The guru crouched and looked into the depths of the valley below him, waiting for something to be spoken, but nothing came. “We should go.”

Jesus followed behind his master, trying to make room in his brain for the cumbersome new philosophies the guru had spoken. Jesus imagined how the Rabbis of his homeland might react to these blasphemies, how they might contort their faces and ultimately throw their noses in the air in false piety. But Jesus saw this image, and he laughed. He laughed because, like his guru, he could feel it too. Every particle of air and dust, every bit of water and fire, every ounce of his flesh and bone were vibrating in the hum of metamorphosis. Waiting. And those old men back home, they couldn’t feel it. They couldn’t feel it at all.

Walking down the trail from the summit, Jesus watched as the ground around them began to slowly change as it had before. The two men were still walking in the rocky dust of desert, but Jesus could see the greener tree line approaching from far off. As he was reciting the names of the trees and bushes in his mind, he looked down to the dirt. *Prickly Acacia, Egyptian Thorn, Fool's Parsley, Black Cumin, Puschkinia...* But then, out of the corner of his eye, a patch of the desert moved. Jesus stopped and studied the dirt in front of his guru's feet and saw it again, the yellow-brown dust of the trail was slipping and sliding— no, slithering—across the trail. “Master!” Jesus cried out and ran ahead.

Like a nightmare, the guru just kept walking forward without paying any attention to Jesus.

“Master, look out,” but just as Jesus was about to call out the word *snake* and stomp the creature's pointed head under his heel, he felt the smack of his back against the ground, and the wind get sucked out of him.

The guru had swept Jesus's supporting leg and tossed him to the dirt like a sack of grain. Then, with an arm as quick as the viper in the dust, the guru snatched the creature up, holding his strong thumb at the base of his head and clamping the sides of its jaw with his fingers. “You all right down there?” he asked Jesus.

With a wheeze and a cough Jesus let his master know he could still breathe. But the wounds on his back were steam that couldn't escape from underneath his skin. Jesus sat up and watched as his guru used his free hand to pull out a glass vial attached to a cord around his neck.

“Have you not listened to a single word I’ve said?” The guru held the mouth of the snake over the open vial. Its dirty-yellow venom trickled down from the exposed fangs and into the tube.

Jesus strained to get up and when he did, he took a closer look at the creature. Nearly three feet long and decorated with patches of brown and yellow, it was perfectly camouflaged on the desert floor. “I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

The guru sighed. “You did not look closely enough. Instead, you let your fears make this creature into your enemy.”

Jesus watched as the guru’s calm hand pumped the poison from the snake’s mouth. The muscular body of the creature coiled around the healer’s arm, but his equally strong muscles were not impaired by the constricting grip. Instead, it appeared as if the two spiraled around one another and belonged to one another. “But master,” Jesus said, “it’s such an ugly thing. Look at those horns above its eyes!”

“Aw, you’re going to hurt its feelings. Besides, what you see as abnormal is perfectly ordinary to this snake. These *horns* are what set him apart from others and what makes his kind unique.” The guru replaced the cork on his vial and stepped towards Jesus, snake in hand. “Anyway, I like to think of them as eyebrows.”

“Haha, not me. Get that thing away from me.”

“I’m holding him tight,” said the guru. “But I need you to look at him, really look.” The healer held the snake up high, inches from Jesus’s face. “You have to see a bit of yourself in everyone.”

Jesus did not flinch, and he tried to do as his new master asked, but all he could see were the cold eyes of death. The viper spat out its tongue. Jesus couldn't help but think he was face to face with a demon. "Ok, I see it. Now put him down."

The healer laughed his same bellowing laugh and the viper laughed too, but nothing else was said. Instead, the guru walked over to a nearby rock, one warmed by the light of the day, where he gently placed the snake in the center of it, all the while shushing it like a child. "Thank you, my friend," said the guru as the viper crawled away to stretch and bask in the heat. The old man, now with more of a lilt in his step, marched back towards the trail. "Catch up!" he called to his slow and aching student. When Jesus came to his side, the master said, "Have you heard tell of an afterlife where you come from?"

Jesus scrunched his eyebrows, wondering where this seemingly simple question came from. "I have. And I believe as they tell me, that the righteous will be seated at the right hand of our Lord, and the wicked will toil in the fires of Gehenna."

"Hmm," said the old man, "well, to be blunt, this is simply what they tell the children to keep them doing their chores. But you are old enough now to not let these fables manipulate you."

Jesus stopped in his tracks. "What are you saying? That all the Rabbis and scribes, all of our forefathers are wrong?"

The guru paused and looked over his shoulder. "In a way, yes. Is this a problem?"

Jesus threw up his hands and guffawed, "A problem? Of course it's a problem! You're saying that there is no eternal reward or punishment, that death is just hollow darkness?"

The healer reached down and plucked a stem of tall grass and stuck it in his mouth. “Most likely, yes.”

Jesus shook his head. “Well, you’re wrong.” He pushed past the old man and continued down the trail by himself. But stern words echoing from behind him yoked him to his place.

“Do not run from me. I am not some costumed buffoon who recites gibberish in caves. I am one who knows.”

Jesus turned and yelled from a reddened face, “There has to be a heaven. There has to be!”

The guru walked towards the heaving chest of the young man and placed a palm on his shoulder. “I never said there wasn’t.”

“Quit talking in circles for just one moment and speak plainly!”

The healer laughed hard enough to make the approaching trees sway. “I am speaking plainly. Heaven exists, it is a real place, but it is not a new place. Hell exists, but it is also not a new place. This, all of this,” he moved his hand around in a full circle, “can be either one. But it is up to you to make that happen. It’s up to all of us.” He put his arm around Jesus’s shoulders and steered him toward the tent. “When the day comes that you can call every man your brother, and when you can look into the viper’s eyes with genuine compassion, this will be the day you are ready to heal. But when the day comes that every man can do this, we will have entered the kingdom of heaven. But woe be unto the world where every man finds his neighbor to be his enemy, for then the rivers will course with fresh blood.”

Jesus sighed, his anger scraped away by sorrow. “But master, what of the dead? How will they know peace?”

“Jesus,” said the gentle tongue of the old man, “the dead are dead. They have found their peace.”

The young man could not bear to hear this. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he shook his head. “No...no,” he said, “he can’t just be *gone*. It can’t be like he never existed. No—”

“Shhh.” The old man embraced the sobbing Jesus and cradled his face against his warm chest. “Your father is not gone, young one. Nothing is ever truly vanished.” The healer hugged the wounded son and rubbed a soothing hand through his hair. When his storm had settled, the old man said, “Let me show you something.”

Stepping over to a rocky patch of dirt, the healer lifted a pebble from the roadside. “See this rock?” He pulled his knife from its sheath and gripped the hilt tightly. “This stone can never be destroyed. It can never disappear, it can only change.” The guru placed the pebble on a larger stone and then hammered at it with the butt of his blade until it turned to dust. “You may say the rock is gone, but I say it is just reborn into something new.” The teacher scooped up the rock dust and tossed it into the wind. “Now, what was a rock is now something more free. It can float and fly and swirl through the air until it finds a new home. And it could land in a rushing river, wash up as rich silt, and feed the lush crops of a hungry family. The rock has become an agent of life. Or it could settle into mud that men shape into bricks for the tallest tower the world has ever seen. The rock has become a source of triumph. Either way, it is no longer the lonely, untapped

rock of this remote trail. And it will keep changing, keep shifting, but it will never truly disappear.”

Jesus wiped his eyes and nodded, but like before with the snake, he was just telling the guru what he wanted to hear. But then his teacher said something that stirred him, something that made him, if only for a moment, feel less empty.

“Your body is the rock. It will be planted and eaten, or built with, or transfigured in some way. But your spirit is something else, something more. It is lightning and rain, wind and fire all at once. But it does not leave this world any more than the rock, any more than the body.” The guru stepped closer to Jesus and placed a hand on each of his cheeks. “Your father is still, in many ways, a part of this world. But you have to not be too afraid to look in the corners of smiles or listen to the breath of the dying or feel the grit of the viper on your hands. These are the places you will feel him once more.”

Without saying another word, the guru walked forward to return home.

Jesus felt his bones fracture and set themselves, his organs turn themselves inside out, and his ears curl inward towards his chin. He couldn't move his feet, couldn't follow this man at all. He was turning to a pillar of salt from toe to waist, but before his throat could be choked by the dry mineral-grip, a gust awakened his senses. And he could smell that mixture of sweat and hot polished stone, that smell of hard work Joseph always carried in the workshop. The dust that the guru had made from crushing the rock found its way into Jesus's nostrils, and it brought him right back to those childhood days of adoring his father. For the first time since his death, Jesus was not wracked with the torture of grief but, instead, contented by the warmth of nostalgia pouring over his skin, washing and cleaning his body.

Resting in the shade of the tent, Jesus caught his breath and drank sips of cool water while he watched the old hermit turn into a cross-legged statue once more. Not wanting another long silence, Jesus stirred the man with a question. “You never told me why you don’t have a name.”

The stone man did not budge until he was ready. But when he opened his eyes he said, “All titles and honors belong to the LORD. I am simply His servant. Soon I hope you will come to feel this way.”

“But I like my name. I like the way it sounds when my mother calls me or when my sister laughs it out.”

The old man could see that Jesus was feeling chatty, so he reached into his satchel and pulled out the familiar bone pipe. “When you start to accomplish great things, when you show tremendous kindnesses to strangers, what would you have them remember? Your name, or your actions?” His quick fingers crushed the dried herb into powdered bits and placed them in the bowl of the pipe. “A name is pride. And pride, no matter how small, detracts from empathy.”

Jesus tightened his brow and rubbed his chin. “Maybe,” he said. “But names also make telling stories a lot easier.”

The old man laughed as he plucked a glowing coal from the fire and lit the pipe. “It’s nice to have a companion here. These hills can be lonely sometimes.” He inhaled the heavy smoke and after many moments, let thick vaporous rings float out of his mouth and perfume the room. “But aside from the conversation, do you know why I agreed to let you stay here? Why I agreed to teach you?”

“No, Master. But I am glad.”

He drew another long breath and exhaled the words, “You have an angel following you.”

“An angel?” Jesus's eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

“I have eyes,” said the healer. “And when I made you the bitter lettuce tea, I saw him hovering over your body. He was waiting, and he is still waiting.”

“What do you mean?” Jesus looked around and over his shoulder as if he might see something. “Waiting for what?”

“Hmm.” The hermit dumped his ash into the fire and repacked the pipe. “Waiting to see what type of man you will be.”

“Why? And how are you so sure this is an angel?”

“I have a nose,” he said. “Demons smell like sulfur and ash.” The man meticulously crumbled smaller and smaller bits of his dried buds. “Angels,” he said, “smell like wet camel.” He looked up at Jesus and grinned. “But maybe this is your smell.”

Jesus laughed. “It could be. Today was quite a hike, and it was very hot for morning.”

“It is always very hot,” he said. Again the hermit snagged a burning ember. “And it is always cold and it is always raining and it is always unbearably dry. Do you understand?”

Jesus's face tangled up in itself. “I don't think so,” he said.

The man held the pipe out to Jesus. “Here,” he said. “Smoke with me and I will explain.”

Jesus took the bone pipe and studied it. He had never smoked before— it wasn't a common practice in Nazareth. He had watched many Arabs do it in his travels though, so he took the pipe and politely mimicked his master.

“Just breathe in deep and slow, like you're sipping from the sun.” The guru smiled in a cloud of smoke.

Jesus put the pipe to his lips and drew in deep so the fire entered his lungs. He tried to let the haze roll from his mouth as the hermit had done, but he hacked up what felt like twenty razors. Every time he coughed, he could feel the scars on his back stretch and throb as if they might tear open at any moment.

“Haha! Now you have the flame in your soul!” The old man smiled wide and took the pipe.

Jesus was still coughing and red in the face. When he stopped, he asked the man what he meant about the heat and the cold.

“Everything is bothersome unless it's beautiful,” he said. “The sun, the water, the cut, the break, the bruise. These things can all bring pain unless they bring pleasure.” He inhaled another deep draw. “But you are the one to choose. Not the wind. Not the rain. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Jesus said. “Have you read this in scripture? Or heard it from a rabbi?”

The healer smiled. “I have lived this. In my travels, I have seen and heard and done many things, and they are all valuable for their own experience. Once, when I first made it to Persia, a man who did not speak my language struck me in the jaw. I did not

run as I have seen you run from pain.” He pointed out to the hills. “I turned my cheek and asked for another punch. Do you understand?”

Jesus stared blankly at the man. The smoke in the room had made his words grow a film around them like stagnant water.

“Life is experience. There is no good or bad, happy or dreadful unless you say so.”

Jesus smiled for a long time before he spoke. “I grew up with an older brother so I never had to ask for a second fist.” Both men laughed at this, but Jesus felt the sound as if it were not coming from him. And then his hands started to rock back and forth on his hips, jumping higher and higher until they floated in front of his face. “My mother thinks these are supposed to be the hands of someone sent by God.”

The guru smiled. “Is that right?”

“Every night before I went to sleep she would sing this song about little baby Moses. She told me that every great man starts off as a child.”

“This much is true.”

“But she also told me that the Lord came to her. Spoke to her when I was still unborn.”

“I see,” said the old man. “And the angel?” He asked. “Did she see him too?”

“She did not.” Jesus became conscious of his own voice and repeated his phrase much more slowly. “She...did...not...”

“I fear that he is not here to reveal any such truth to you. In this way angels can be more of a nuisance than you might think.” The guru held up the vial that he still wore

around his neck, now that same glowing honey color from the fever dreams. “What is this?”

Jesus didn't seem to understand the question. “Master,” he said. Every syllable, every sound lasted much too long. “Maa-sstt-uurrr,” he said again. “It's POY-zunn. Poison. poi-sson.” The words felt like the fuzz of molding fruit.

When the old man laughed this time he swallowed the room and belched it out again with every beat from his chest and diaphragm. “Nothing is poisonous except for the dosage. Do you know this? This venom can be very good medicine, but in the wrong measurement it is poison. Just like everything else in this room, remember?”

Jesus nodded, even after he was ready to stop.

“And there is one such angel who is not one but both. Samael, the poison and the balm of our Lord. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Jesus shook his head, even after he was ready to stop.

“He is watching you and all of us. And from time to time, he will test us all like he did Job. And it is in this temptation that he will come to know you. Do you understand?”

Jesus blinked and kept blinking until there was only one guru and he was sure that it was his turn to speak. “Yes,” he said finally.

“Haha! Good, but I must ask you one question. Why do you want to be this chosen one? This man *sent by God* as you say?”

Jesus sat and thought, the haze of his mind thinning to something more manageable. “I'm not sure.”

“Many people know what they desire, but many forget why. I cannot help you if you do not know why.”

“But, it's my destiny. My mother has told me my whole life this is my destiny.”

“Oh? My father was a landowner and had many vineyards. This was my destiny, yet here I am.”

Jesus was silent. “I want them all to know I am not just some...”

“What?”

He clenched his teeth at the thought. “Some bastard child,” said Jesus. “I want everyone to stop looking at my mother like she's some sort of monster.”

“I have ears,” he said. “And this sounds like pride. I cannot teach your mind if pride blocks your heart.”

“Well, what's the right answer then?” Jesus raised his voice. “I've chased this knowledge my whole life, I've studied the scriptures and heard the message, I've been baptized and I've felt it in my blood that I'm supposed to save my people somehow. I don't think I want to,” he said, “I think I have to.”

“Savior is a terrible burden,” the hermit said. “Do you know this?”

“I do.”

The old man squinted. “My father had a hound when I was small. This animal always chased after birds with all of his speed and strength, but never caught one before it flew away. But one day, the dog did catch one. The bird was too afraid to take flight. But instead of grabbing the creature up and ripping it to shreds, the dog just sat there and stared.” The hermit paused. “Do you understand?”

“I am not chasing birds,” Jesus said. “There is so much poverty and sickness where I come from. I only want to turn the burn of the sun into warmth and the pounding of the rain into refreshment. I want to do the good that others refuse to do.”

“And do you think you will save them? Your people?”

Jesus thought for a while. “Maybe I can help them learn to save themselves.”

The guru grinned, pleased by the response. He reached out his hands to grab Jesus's. “This I can teach you.”

Jesus smiled and nodded. He wanted to say *thank you*, but the words that formed instead were, “But can we eat first? I’m starving.”

After his grumbling stomach told him forever had come and gone, Jesus was elated to see the guru return from the garden with two shining pomegranates in his hands. The old man used a sharp knife to cut across the circumference of the fruit, and Jesus’s mouth watered with every turn of the blade. With a sharp twist of his wrists, the guru snapped the ruby orbs into two equal dripping halves and placed them on a tray in front of Jesus. But as Jesus reached his greedy fingers towards the lush seeds, he felt a whack against the bridge of his nose.

“Patience,” said the guru as he smacked Jesus with a thin bronze instrument.

“Ow!” Jesus cried out with misting eyes. “What did you do that for?”

The master roared and laughed. “To wake you up. This isn’t a lunch break, we are still training. You will never stop learning until I can trust you with my life.”

Jesus looked up at the hugging darkness in the gaps between the old man’s teeth. He saw a severity present in the healer’s face that wasn’t always there. One that shook

Jesus awake and back towards the reason why he was here in the first place. “Yes, master. What will you have me do?”

The guru smiled even wider. “I will have you eat. But only after you remove each seed, one at a time, with these.” He held the bronze instrument up for Jesus to inspect.

“What is it?”

“These are forceps,” said the old man, “but if you practice enough they will come to be extensions of your fingers.” He handed the forceps off to Jesus. The young novice tried holding the tool in his hand with multiple grips, twisting and turning the metal in his hands until something felt comfortable. “Take each seed, one at a time, and place them in this dish.” The guru put a small clay bowl on the wooden tray with the pomegranate.

“Then you may eat them.”

Jesus looked up and nodded, his brow creased in determination. “Yes, Guru.”

And the old man walked back towards his seat to open up his own fruit in the same precise motions as before.

Jesus looked down at his dimly lit workspace, the light from the fire mirroring the ever-darkening twilight, and stared at the moist inviting seeds. He gripped each small handle of the forceps, one in the left hand one in the right hand, and tried to operate them like tiny sheers.

“Use only one hand,” called the guru without even looking.

Jesus stared at him in disbelief as he held up his own pair of forceps, opening and closing them with just a flick of his agile fingers. When the clumsy student tried to hold the tool in this way, it fell from his hand before he could even try to pluck a seed. Eventually, he got the motion right, and Jesus went into the fruit with the ends of his

forceps. When he tried to grab hold of one of the seeds, however, the slippery red kernel shot across the table. Jesus felt like he was trying to catch raindrops on the point of a toothpick. After minutes of not being able to pick up a single bite he said, “This is impossible!”

But what he hadn’t noticed was that the guru was plucking seeds at will with his forceps, tossing them in the air, and catching them in his mouth.

“Sorry,” said the old man as he swallowed his food, “I couldn’t hear you. I guess I was chewing too loudly. What were you saying?”

The old man pinched another glistening crimson bit from his pomegranate, tossed it into the air and caught it in between his teeth. Jesus just shook his head in defeat and said, “Nothing.”

The old man laughed with a full mouth. “Keep trying. You’ll get it when you’re hungry enough.”

Jesus heard his stomach growl and thought he was plenty hungry. But he kept trying until finally his shaking hands managed to grasp one of the seeds and drop it into the dish. The plink of that tiny scrap against the ceramic bowl—that miniscule sound—was his redemption. “I did it!” he shouted out. “Thank the Lord, I really did it.”

But as Jesus was about to reach into the dish so that he might drop the morsel into a stomach devouring itself, he heard the guru say, “Ah, ah, ah! Not so fast young apprentice. You must remove all of the seeds before you can eat.”

Jesus’s jaw smacked the dirt of the floor. “But...master I—”

“Keep going.” The sternness was plastered on his face again so Jesus knew he had no option other than to obey.

The old man told his student how the average pomegranate can contain anywhere from two hundred to fourteen hundred seeds. And in those interminable starving hours while he worked for his dinner, long after the guru had his fill of the fruit, Jesus discovered that his particular pomegranate held six hundred and twenty-three shining seeds. It didn't help the apprentice's morale that every time the guru walked by he pilfered a bite or two from Jesus's bowl. Finally, with a cramping forearm and trembling lips, Jesus dropped the final piece into his dish and let a loud sigh echo out from his lungs. His neck was stiff and his fingers rusted at the joints, but more than anything, he was beyond ready to eat. As Jesus hungrily lifted the dish to his mouth, ready to receive the fruits of his labor, he felt the hand of a ghost slide in front of his face, snatching the food from his mouth.

“Good,” said the guru, “you’ve finished with the seeds. Now it’s time to practice on this.”

In Jesus's concentration on his task, he failed to realize that it could be the first of many. He also failed to notice that his master had brought in a couple of leeks from the garden and they had been roasting over the fire for quite some time. As the old man took the dish of lustrous rations away, he dropped a steaming leek, halved lengthwise, on Jesus's tray-turned-operating table.

“For this you will need two more tools.” The guru handed Jesus a bronzed and shining blunt hook and a similarly smithed miniature blade. “Hook and scalpel, two of your new best friends.” The old man demonstrated what each one was for and how they should be used. “First take your hook and reach deep into the stalk. Try and pull on a single fiber from the bottom to the top, without hooking anything else, and without

tearing it away. Every strand that you accidentally pull out with the hook goes in this dish.” He set down a flatter clay dish to the left of Jesus. “But every one that you hook correctly, bring to the top, and cut away with the scalpel,” the guru demonstrated the technique as he spoke, “every one of those fibers, you place in this dish.” He set down a similar vessel to the right of Jesus. “Before you begin, know this, I eat all of your mistakes. So be precise if you truly want dinner.”

Jesus grumbled. “I didn’t even get to eat the last course.”

“What was that, student?”

“Oh,” Jesus said, “nothing. It’s nothing. I need to get to work.”

“Yes, you do.” And with that, the guru returned to his own seat. The old man worked in rhythm with his breath, with his heartbeat, and Jesus watched as the master pulled with the hook, cut with the scalpel, and gently placed the leek fiber into his dish.

Jesus took the small blunt hook in his left hand first and tried to pull a single strand from the bottom of the stalk. He grasped one and got it by itself, but in his excitement he tugged on it too hard and ripped it from the leek.

Without looking up or interrupting his pace, the guru said, “My dish.”

Jesus obeyed and put the wisp of food into the dish at his left. Frustration carved itself into his reddening face.

“The last lesson was patience. This one is precision. The gentle hand is the healing hand.”

Reaching in with the hook once more, Jesus felt himself rolling his eyes. This time he pulled two strands at a time and was forced to place them in his master’s dish. But finally he fell into the motion of hook, pull, cut, and just about every other steaming

string found its way into his own dish. Admittedly, he decided this task was slightly easier than his first, but his hunger was skewing his vision and unleashing his snarling aggression. Jesus thought of that day in his youth, when his brother and *friends* tricked him into climbing that tree just to throw stones at him. But with every hook, pull, cut, the anger he felt started to fade away, little by little, until he noticed that he had picked the stalk clean.

“Very good,” said the old man. “You almost have enough in your dish for two bites.” Before Jesus made the mistake of reaching for his bowl again, he waited to watch what the guru would do next. Sure enough, he took both dishes from Jesus’s tray and set them aside with the pomegranate seeds. “Last one for tonight,” he said. “I promise.” The healer grabbed a swollen eggplant from his pantry corner and cut it in half so that there were two symmetrical shapes with flat meaty bottoms. The healer then placed the flat bottom down onto Jesus’s tray so that it would not move. “You will first divide the vegetable’s skin into even sections with your scalpel. Move lightly over the outer layer in a long vertical stroke and bring the edge towards you.” The guru showed his student by taking the scalpel and etching a very thin line down the length of the eggplant’s surface. “You want each section to be about three fingers apart from the one next to it.” The old man hovered over Jesus’s shoulder as he drew the lines with his blade, occasionally saying things like “not so deep!” or “keep your incisions straight!”

After Jesus had finished he looked up at his master in search of some sort of praise.

Instead, all he heard was, “For the next step you will need these.” He held out tiny needles that looked like they were for sewing and another instrument that looked like

the forceps but with thinner, flatter pinching edges. “In each section, you should have enough room for three square incisions about like this.” He pointed to the length between the first and second knuckles of his pinky. “The first step is to cut along the skin layer like so.” The healer showed Jesus how to cut smoothly through the skin without damaging the flesh in a small “I” shape.

“Then, you use the tweezers to peel back each flap. Finally, practice pinning the skin to the surrounding parts to keep it out of your working space.” The guru peeled back the thin membrane of purple skin, pinned it to the vegetable, and then picked up the scalpel again.

“The last thing is to cut a perfectly square chunk of the eggplant meat and pull it out without damaging the skin layer around you.” The guru demonstrated and then looked to Jesus’s ghastly face. “When you pull a piece out, toss it into the pot on the fire.”

Reviewing every tiny step, every subtle motion, Jesus absently spoke the words “Yes, Guru” and began his work. Once again, Jesus began by making every mistake the guru warned him against, but eventually, well into the darkness of night, the boiling pot over the fire was filled with eggplant meat, and Jesus’s body felt like it had been doing hard labor all day. When the old man rewarded Jesus with the dish of seeds and the reheated leek and the freshly cooked eggplant seasoned with cardamom and fennel, he almost made the mistake of saying he wasn’t even hungry anymore. But that was an error he quickly avoided. As the steam from the hot food reached his nose, he instantly felt his tongue dance behind his teeth, and grabbed each bowl like a savage, dumping the dinner down his gullet without the formality of chewing.

“Haha!” bellowed the healer. “You will work more and you will get better and you will have more on your plate to eat. But for now, you will make me a very fat man!”

From that point forward, every meal was prefaced with surgical practice. Every Halaby pepper transformed into a tumor, and Jesus had to be careful to slice through the skin without puncturing through to the bloody, spicy juice. Every onion had to be treated like a newborn, each layer of skin too precious to let crack or crumble. And after a few months of practice, Jesus discovered that his fingers could exercise a previously unknown measure of dexterity.

One day, probing through the pores of a dimpled radish, Jesus’s concentration was shattered by the sudden entrance of the guru.

“Catch!” the old man shouted. And in that moment he tossed a small flexible ball into the air towards Jesus. With a quick reaction time, one that had been conditioned by the healer's numerous eccentricities, Jesus caught the squishy ball in his right hand.

“A present for you,” the old man said with a giddy lilted tone.

Jesus studied the warm and wet thing in his hand. It wasn't quite as round as he had thought, and it floundered around in his hand like something nearly intangible.

“What is this?” Jesus asked.

The healer looked down at his pupil with scrunched eyebrows. “It's a bladder. What else?”

Jesus squealed and dropped the organ out of his hands and onto the mat in front of him. “What!”

“Oh no, no, no!” The guru rushed toward the thing like Jesus had thrown an infant across the room. When he picked it up, he almost cuddled or petted the slimy bladder, praying that it was all right. “Do you realize how valuable this is for you? It's not every day that you get a real organ to practice with instead of some lumpy vegetable.”

“And where exactly did you get that thing?” Jesus wore a mask of horror.

“From a boar. I had a trap set down by the river. Thought I'd snag us some small game, but can you imagine my surprise?”

Jesus looked down at his quivering hands painted with the viscous insides of the animal. “Master,” he said in a whisper. “What have I done? I can't touch any part of that filthy animal. You know this.”

A genuine shock spread across the guru's face. “You mean, after all this time, you still hold on to the dietary laws?”

Jesus nodded slowly.

“Oh,” the guru said, “then, I suppose I'm the only one excited for dinner.”

The two men walked down the trail towards the river. Jesus needed to cleanse himself and perform ablutions, and the guru had plenty of business with his pig prisoner. “Are you sure you can't even practice with the organs? Or watch as I remove them? You'd be surprised how close the pig's body is to your own.”

Jesus shook his head. He was marching ahead, still in disbelief that his teacher could be so insensitive. “I will have no part in the swine. The law of my ancestors, the Law of Moses forbids this. You of all people should know this.”

The guru bellowed out his signature laugh. “I apologize for offending you, my friend,” he said, “but I feel no remorse for disillusioning myself from humble superstition. I do not turn down the bounty that our Lord provides, no matter what kind of hooves it walks on.”

Unconvinced, Jesus walked on. His only concern was washing away his mistake in the coursing river water.

“Anyway, if you won't use the bladder, you can still practice using this.” The old man held up a metal tube with a slight curvature. “This is called a catheter, and it is terribly important for draining fluid or opening up blocked cavities. Most commonly you'll give an old man the gift of pissing freely.” He laughed as he walked on. “And trust me, as an old man myself, it is a wonderful gift to bestow.” The guru grabbed near his own crotch and started pretending he was urinating in wide arcs all around him.

Jesus wanted to laugh, but he was still angry. He also didn't want the guru to think that he would forgive him so readily. Not to mention he felt the blood rush to his cheeks in embarrassment. Jesus had been away from guttural men for so long that he had nearly forgotten how to laugh at crude jokes. When they arrived at the river, the young apprentice stripped off his tunic and waded into the current, plunging his sullied hands into the water, praying ritualistically as he went.

The healer ignored this and walked straight over to his home-made pitfall trap. Inside of it lay a matted fur, sharp-tusked wild boar, breathless in a pool of fresh gore. “I saved the rest of the dissection for you to see,” the old man began to say. But as he turned he saw that Jesus was ignoring him. So he set about his work by field-dressing the animal, cutting away the muscular flanks to salt and save for winter. Even though he

wasn't listening, the guru occasionally called out things to his student like, "I can't believe you've never had pork chops before! Makes my teeth chatter just thinking about it."

After a while, Jesus saw that his hands were clean and felt a calm wash over him. He stepped out of the river to watch as his master, now busying himself by the bank, crafted something from the soft earth. "Here," said the guru. "This will serve you well enough as a makeshift bladder. After it stands here for a moment and stiffens, fill it with water. You'll know you're doing it right if the water comes out of the catheter only, and not from a crack in the vessel." The old man handed the tube to Jesus. "Keep practicing a few times until the bladder has too many holes in it to take on water. Then make a new one and repeat."

Jesus nodded and said, "For how long, Master?"

The guru, who had already turned to walk away, looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Hmm... I guess until my rack of ribs is finished cooking." And he laughed himself all the way back to the pitfall.

Jesus knelt down on the bank of the river and started poking the catheter into the soft clay. Over and over he watched as the water dripped out. Sometimes the tube would gunk up and he had to take it to the river for cleaning. Sometimes the vessel would fall apart and he would have to craft a new one. But the hardest part of the whole procedure was smelling the roasting flesh of pig wafting downwind from the guru's spit. Jesus coveted that dripping succulent meat, but he would never admit it to himself or to his master.

"You know," called the guru from his fire, "I admire your convictions. It's easy to change your beliefs when it is to your benefit, but I have not seen you do this."

Jesus listened, but he kept poking and prodding at his earthen bladders as he was instructed.

“Have you ever met many Greeks?” The guru didn't expect an answer from his still-seething student, so he didn't wait for one. “Greeks are a funny bunch,” he said. “They eat pork. But heaven forbid you cook it for them because,” the guru paused and laughed to himself, “because any Greek will tell you that they can cook it better. But they're not always wrong you know, sometimes they've got a point.” He paused for a moment to make sure the ribs were secure on his makeshift rotisserie. “All those fancy metal tools you use, the Greeks made those. And guess what? Your Roman buddies stole them all and tried to pass them off as their own genius.”

Jesus thought of all the Roman soldiers he used to see in his homeland. He remembered how their breastplates and short swords turned them into gods, or so they thought. And how each of them smiled every time they had the opportunity to make someone feel beneath them.

“I guess that's all they know though,” the guru called out. “Conquerors can only conquer. But it is not by force that the universe was created, and it is not by force that the Lord holds dominion over it, but by compassion.” The old man breathed in the aromatic smoke from his fire and rubbed his belly. “Remember that. Never forget that the catheter you're holding over there is much more powerful than any legionnaire's spear.”

Jesus did not look at his master. Instead, he tried to block out the savory odor of fresh and forbidden meat. Instead he looked at his mud-coated hands and cursed them.

The next few days Jesus alternated between tasks like probing through the holes and fractures in some dead wood that the guru collected by the river, and practicing bandaging techniques on his master. “Remember that most of the time you must be extremely gentle. The slightest scrape or friction could be extreme pain for your patient.” Jesus wrapped the cloths and applied the fake poultices over and over again absentmindedly until his thoughts were interrupted by the guru shouting in his ear. “Ouch! You're killing me, you're killing me!” The old man would smile and beg Jesus to pay more attention.

“This is so pointless!” Jesus stood up and threw his arms in the air. “For months I have done everything you asked and I haven't helped a single person. Applying fake bandages to fake wounds isn't going to make me into a healer.”

The guru frowned and sighed. “You have two choices,” he said in a low tone. “Either take this knife and cut into the flesh of my arm to watch me bleed,” the old man held up his blade for Jesus, “or start using your imagination.”

Jesus took a deep breath and sat back down in front of the healer.

“Now,” he said in the same calm voice, “listen to me before you start again. I want you to first close your eyes.”

Jesus did what he was asked and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Now just relax your mind. Breathe easy. I want you to find the face of your mother in the darkness of memory. Remember her voice, her scent, her words, her embrace.”

Jesus searched through his thoughts and, for the first time in a long time, had a clear vision of the woman he loved most in the world. A part of his heart split open fresh, and he felt a pressure in his chest that was almost foreign.

“Open your eyes,” said the guru, “and when you apply this bandage, pretend that I am your mother.”

Jesus started to laugh at the thought but cleared his mind and tried to do as he was asked. This time, he applied the poultice with a smoothness and a tranquility that he was unaware he contained. “How does that feel?” he asked.

“Very nice,” said the master. “Now show me how to wrap the cloth.”

Jesus used the same slow motions to wrap the bandage in place, constantly looking from the imaginary wound to the face of the guru, constantly asking if he were comfortable.

When the wrap was in place the healer said, “You have done it. Just as easy as that.”

“Thank you,” Jesus said.

“Don't thank me,” the old man told him. “Just remember that every patient is as much the flesh of your flesh as your own mother, and then you will succeed. Then you will be a true healer.” The guru stood from his place and removed the bandage. “Now get some sleep. We travel tomorrow to Babylon.”

Jesus felt his eyes widen. “Master?”

“You said it yourself, it's time that you get some real practice. Rest up, because tomorrow you will go into your first surgery.”

The next day the two rose early, before the light of morning, and began the long journey to the city that the guru had pointed out to Jesus many months before. The young man had heard countless tales of the once-great city, but none of these legends prepared him for the squalor that rose before him upon entering the ruins. Once-illustrious architecture was crumbling at the base, the roads were lined with refuse and excrement, and the sick and begging spotted every corner.

“We will travel to the mason’s village and away from any battlefields.”

Jesus knew he needed the experience of treatment under pressure, alleviating trauma, but he did not protest his master’s decision. Not this day. Instead, he followed along like a scared child, afraid to wander too far from the healer’s robes.

Once the pair of them came closer to where the day-laborers crafted stones from the quarry, people began to recognize the guru and greet him in a strange tongue. Jesus was not surprised when he spoke back to them. After a while, a small child came running to the healer and tugged at his wrists, repeating some excited phrase. “And we have a patient,” said the guru to Jesus.

The two of them followed the young boy to a small hut. Inside was a single room with an elderly man stretched out on a mat. The room smelled like stale bread and was painted in the grey of rainclouds. And even though Jesus couldn’t speak the language of those surrounding the ailing man, he soon discovered the source of worry. The man kept coughing violently, a wet and thick cough coming deep from his lungs. Every time he made the gurgling gasping noise, Jesus felt the nearly forgotten scars on his back start to tingle.

“Step over here and help me, apprentice,” said the healer. Without realizing it, Jesus stood motionless in the threshold with his hand held over his face. He hadn’t even bothered to put down his master’s bags. “I said, come over here.” The guru wore deeply etched lines of frustration in his brow.

Jesus stepped forward slowly, wondering how long he could pay attention while holding his breath. When he stood beside his master, he sat the bags down on the ground and looked at his feet.

“Well, don’t just sit idle,” he said. “We need to make a potion. What do you think will help this man’s cough?”

“I, I don’t—”

“Jesus,” said the old man sternly, “focus on the task. Remember, flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood.”

Jesus tried to collect himself, but all he could see when he looked at the man was a sunken face and the snotty spittle collecting around the crooks of his mouth. But after a moment, he shook the image from his mind and opened up the satchel. “I think we should make a tea,” he said.

“This is a good start,” said the guru, “but what will you put in it?”

Jesus searched through the different herbs they had with them, even though he knew exactly what his master carried after months of memorizing and studying. Finally he said, “It should be eucalyptus-based.”

The guru nodded. “A fine choice, but why not mint? Will it not soothe him just as well?”

“Perhaps,” said Jesus, “but we are running low on mint leaves. Also, judging by this man’s color, I think we need to treat him for infection. Eucalyptus has a double purpose here. And maybe I could use valerian root to help him sleep.”

“Very good!” said the guru. “I have some dried leaves already prepared, so just boil those in the kettle outside. Don’t forget to slice the root into thin slivers and let it steep. When you finish, though, add some of this.” He held up a small glass cylinder. “The oil of thyme will ensure that the infection will not spread. Just use a few drops, no more.”

Jesus nodded and began to take the ingredients he needed to the outdoor stove when he was interrupted by the guru, “And what would you add to the tea if this were me ailing? You must remember that comfort is also healing.”

Jesus stood in the doorway, a curious look on his face. Then he smiled as he said, “Honey would make the taste more pleasant and coat his throat.”

“Now you’re learning. Return when it is brewed and I will inspect it.”

Jesus exited the hut to find a group of dirty villagers all eagerly awaiting a diagnosis. They stared into Jesus with eyes hungering for good news. Their glares quivered like a lower lip, trying to postpone the inevitable tears of grief. He could say nothing to them that they would understand, but he did his best to smile. After he boiled the dried leaves and root flakes in the kettle and added the drops of the thyme tincture, he returned to the hut to find his master kneeling over the ailing man. The guru had his eyes closed and sang the familiar healing chant of *Om Nashi Me*. With every rhythmic beat, every melodic note, the guru’s hands waved and washed over the sick man’s body. His

palms sailed through the air in a serpentine motion as if he were spreading sand evenly across a surface, but he never touched the physical body.

Jesus watched for a long time before he realized that he was staring. “I have the tea, Master.” But the guru did not respond until he had finished his mantra, until he had washed and oiled the man’s spirit with the anointing of *Om Nashi Me*. When he had finished, the man was coughing less and the guru motioned for Jesus to pour a cup of tea. He did so and handed it to his master. The guru brought the cup to his nose and sifted through the aromas of each ingredient. “More honey.”

“Yes, Master.” When Jesus returned the cup, he watched as the healer cradled the man’s head in his lap. Jesus saw the carefulness with which his master poured the tea into the sick mouth, being sure to blow the steam off the top before he administered it. And as if it were his own throat, the guru knew exactly when to tilt the cup and when to allow time to swallow, when to let the man rest and when to soothe him with his words and prayers. When the cup was empty, the guru placed the elderly man’s head on the mat as gently as he had scooped it up. And within a few moments, his eyes were closing heavily for sleep. The healer spoke to the patient’s wife who waited outside with the others, telling her not to worry and how often to give the tea. Before they left the home, the guru embraced the woman and gave her the gift of reassurance packaged in a smile.

The crowd of strangers all waved and exclaimed as Jesus and his teacher walked away, and Jesus couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride. But without having to ask, without fishing for any sort of compliment, Jesus felt the warm hand of his master grip his shoulder as they walked. With the same toothless grin he gave to the old woman, the guru looked at his pupil and said, “You did well.”

It had been so long, so very long since Jesus had felt anything like this. The embrace of an approving hand, the support of someone in a position of power, the love of a close friend. He wanted to be more grateful, he wanted to show his master the respect that he deserved for teaching him so many things, but before he could say a word, another villager approached the guru in need of healing, and the two ran off to where they were needed.

The canvas roll that held his collection of instruments, the one so similar to something Joseph would have carried, taunted him. Jesus stood in the second hut, much like the first, crippled by self-doubt. He thought that his first day would be setting bones, applying bandages, or just watching his master work, but he never could have imagined what was about to happen.

“Jesus,” said the guru, “are you ready to begin?” The old man had been speaking to the second patient and sharing sips of fortified wine with him, a middle-aged man by the name of Gaspar, whose stare was trained on Jesus. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Master,” Jesus said with hesitation.

“Speak freely,” the guru told him, “Gaspar cannot understand Aramaic. What concerns you?”

Jesus rubbed his hands together and looked to the floor. “It’s just that, I haven’t practiced this before.”

“Nonsense,” said the guru, “you have plenty of practice with all of these instruments except for the speculum. And that works just like the forceps but in reverse.” The guru turned again towards Gaspar and spoke something that Jesus could not

understand. But Gaspar nodded and lifted himself up from his side as he had been positioned, to his hands and knees. The guru moved the pillow so that Gaspar could rest his head easily while keeping his backside high in the air.

“Master, it’s just that—”

“What is it?”

“I just thought that I would be doing something, I don’t know, something a little more—.”

The guru stepped in close to his student to conceal his tone from their patient.

“I’m sorry,” he said through clenched teeth, “is this procedure beneath you?”

“No, no,” Jesus started to say defensively.

“Then is it too grotesque? Is that what you think?”

“Well, I mean, it’s—”

“Let me put it this way.” The guru pointed outside the window. “Did you count the children out there?”

“No, Master.”

“There are five of them. Three daughters. And Gaspar is their father. In his current condition he can’t even walk, let alone work in the quarry. If you don’t help him by removing these hemorrhoids, his children will go hungry. Is that what you want?”

“No master, I just—”

“Then prepare yourself for the task at hand.” And with that, the healer returned to Gaspar’s side, stuffing his herbs into censers fashioned from reeds.

And before Jesus had a chance to wrap his head around what his master was asking of him, he saw that the guru had begun the process. As the old man lit the incense

and circled the room, Jesus watched as the space around them became fumigated with the smoke of white mustard and star anise. With shaking hands, Jesus placed two oil lamps near Gaspar to better illuminate the afflicted area.

When the guru had circled the room for the seventh time, he placed the smoking censers in front of Gaspar and joined Jesus at the rear. With a quick motion, he hoisted up Gaspar's robes to expose the forest of black curls covering his hairy haunches. "I am here beside you to talk you through every step. Now, what is the first thing you must do?"

Jesus stepped back with wide eyes at the revolting sight in front of him. In this position, he could see the patient's reddened anus and smell his inability to wash properly. But after the guru shook him back into reality, Jesus held up the rectal speculum and said "I have to open the cavity to get a better look."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said the healer. He pointed to the blunt metal instrument. "This man is in suffering. The last thing he wants to feel is another sharp pain in his ass." The guru pulled two skins from his satchel. One was much larger so he poured it freely into a small dish. "Olive oil will make this process go over a whole lot more smoothly if you know what I mean." He laughed and patted Gaspar on the back and must have said something funny to him because the man with the fireball in his anus cracked a smile.

"What is in the second skin?"

"This is tamanu oil. Use a rag to coat the operating ends of the speculum with the olive oil first. Then, lightly pour this on top as a local numbing agent." The guru stood up and fetched the wineskin he was using earlier. "But before you do that, Gaspar wanted some more of my strong drink, haha! Hopefully your hands will be steady and he won't need it."

Jesus watched as the guru gave another couple of sips to the patient before he began to coat the instrument with the oil mixture. After he applied the tamanu oil, his master reappeared beside him to hold one of the lamps. "I'm ready," Jesus said.

The healer looked to his student and smiled. "Relax, and remember your teachings."

Jesus took a calming breath and positioned his face in front of the strange man's bare ass, his nose inches away from the crack. With one hand, Jesus gripped a cheek to pull it to the side so he could insert the greased up speculum.

Gaspar winced but did not cry out.

"You're doing great," said the guru. "Now when you penetrate a few inches, slowly open the instrument and lock it into place, making sure that the stretch doesn't tear any inflamed tissue."

Jesus did as he was told, breathing slowly, careful not to agitate the speculum too much, only opening the rectum wide enough as needed.

"Good," said the guru, "now I'll hold it while you tell me what you see."

Jesus handed off the instrument to his master, only to the mild discomfort of Gaspar, and began to look around inside. "I think I see the source of irritation."

"Hmm," said the healer, "just one?"

Looking again, Jesus saw a smaller fistula deeper in the bowel. "Two, Master."

"Very good. Let's do the larger one first. What tool should you employ?"

Knowing he needed to remove the hemorrhoid, Jesus looked at his collection of scalpels. He selected a small handled blade with a serrated edge and held it up.

“Oh!” exclaimed the healer. “I don’t think Gaspar would appreciate the sawing sensation in such a delicate area. Perhaps the curved lance would serve you better. You should be able to make a clean incision without any tearing.”

So Jesus picked up the other tool and began to reenter the rectum. “Maybe you should tell him not to move.”

The guru nodded and passed on the advice. He must have said it a little more pointedly than Jesus because Gaspar turned to stone in an instant. “Be sure to follow your own advice,” the healer said. “One slip and this turns into a very serious problem. Just breathe and relax.”

Jesus nodded and slowly inserted the scalpel. After months and months of scarring fruits and vegetables, peeling roots and reeds, the fistula scraped away clean. But despite Jesus’s nimble movement, one that his master was proud of, Gaspar screamed in pain, and blood began to trickle from the incision. “What do I do, what do I do?”

“Calm yourself,” said the guru. “I have a probe prepared.” He held up a thin metal rod with a wad of cloth on the end. “I have balm on it now to clot the blood, but afterward you will apply the oil to it.”

Jesus took the probe and pressed it tightly against the oozing pore.

“You’re doing fine.” The guru spoke to Gaspar and then laughed. “He says you’re the gentlest sodomite he’s ever known.” The master did well to stifle his normal laugh since he was still holding the speculum.

After the bleeding stopped, Jesus applied the oil as he was instructed and prepared to remove the second fistula. “I don’t know if I can see it well enough.”

“You can see it. Confidence is sunlight but fear is shadows.” The guru smiled at his student. “You have practiced for this. Now show me.”

Again the apprentice reached into the cavity with the greased scalpel. This time he hesitated, squinted and took a deep breath. But before he gave up, he thought of the faces of all the people from his homeland. He thought about how there was no one in his town of Nazareth who could perform these miracles. And then he thought of Gaspar’s face, how it didn’t seem all that different from his neighbors’. He closed his eyes and let the words of *Om Nashi Me* emanate from his soul and to the Lord, then, with settled vision, he made the cut.

“Perfect,” said the guru. “And see, Gaspar didn’t even feel that one!”

That was a half-truth because the patient was still screaming pretty loudly. But Jesus applied the balm as before and oiled the area before allowing his master to inspect it. And just like that, his first surgery was behind him. And a success.

After he rinsed and dried all the instruments and packed up the herbs and oils, Jesus signaled to the guru that he was ready to go. “Ah, come over here, young one. Gaspar wants to say something to you.”

He felt his eyes narrow but Jesus slogged to Gaspar’s other end before leaving. Again, his embarrassment had returned, and Jesus could hardly look in the patient’s eyes. But then he felt the grip of two strong hands around his own. Sounds shot out of Gaspar’s mouth, words that Jesus couldn’t speak, but when Jesus looked into the man’s face, he understood.

“Thank you,” he said. *Thank you.*

On the way home that day, the guru beamed with excitement, and with humor, and with a pinch of pride. “See there, young one,” he said in joy, “this day was a great success for the both of you. Gaspar didn’t break wind in your face, and you didn’t get a spot of shit on your hands!” And the hills were rolling laughter, gasping for air, exhausted from their jubilation.

After many weeks, a pair of Judean merchants called upon the guru for aid. Mathias of Arad and his business partner, Tabor, appeared in the guru’s camp to ask him and Jesus to attend to Mathias’s father. He was very old, but had only in the past months gone almost completely blind.

“I’ll warn you,” Mathias said as they walked down the main road of town, “my father isn’t the warmest person you’ll ever meet.”

“That’s putting it very gently,” Tabor said. “He’s a jackass.”

“Hey!” Mathias said.

“Ow, ow, don’t yell. My head is splitting.”

“Oh, I wonder why?” Mathias pointed an accusatory finger at the canteens of wine Tabor kept hitched to his shoulder.

It was easy enough to see that, despite the bickering, they must have been successful at their trade. Of the pair, Mathias appeared to be the elder. He wore his travels and worldly experience in the silk of his fine robes and in the emerald globe that dangled from his right ear-lobe. Mathias was either a little vain or very afraid of aging because his facial hair was neatly groomed to a point that Jesus had not thought possible. Even his eyebrows appeared to be smoothed out and symmetrical.

Tabor, on the other hand, seemed to care much less about his outward appearance. He too wore exotic fineries, not beyond his means or in some gaudy fashion, but they were far from tasteful with all the snags in the sleeves and stains at the hem of the robes. Tabor was clearly younger and almost sickly looking. This was not because he was too thin (although his belly was not quite as rotund as his partner's) but because of the jaundiced yellow tinge his skin radiated. And after a while, it settled in that this complexion was no temporary condition—every few paces, like a trained soldier, Tabor fingered the canteens on his belt meticulously to make sure they were still attached.

Jesus listened as the two of them bantered. Mathias would say that if the term *business partner* meant *profits drinker* then Tabor really fit the description. Tabor would retort with something like “I have to keep drink in me to tolerate your nagging all the time.” Jesus could tell they had been close friends for many years. But as the four of them walked down the path through town, Jesus lost himself in all the houses and the vendors setting up in the market.

Old women shouted the prices of wicker baskets, trying to charm buyers with their song. The banter of haggling vibrated from wall to wall and made travelers deaf to the fluttering and cock-a-doodling of vicious roosters strutting free from their masters. And behind all the wares and tents and sights of the bazaar, pickpockets lurked in doorways and corners, waiting patiently for a dust storm to kick up or for some hothead to argue costs with merchants—this was thief's camouflage. Jesus saw all this and breathed it in. He was smiling like when he was a little boy.

“Don't worry,” the guru said. “My apprentice here is starting to become quite the people person. I'm sure he will get along fine with your father.”

“I hope so,” Mathias said. He looked over Jesus, trying to judge his ability by examining his hands or wrinkles around the eyes or by such other arbitrary means. “Are you sure you have everything you need?”

Jesus was in a daze, but he answered after his master nudged him. “What? Oh, yes, yes, of course. But there is one thing.” The group came to the little hut. “I need you and Tabor to have faith and to pray. My master and I are like these tools that I carry.” He held up the satchel for Mathias and Tabor to see. “We are only as good as the will of the Lord. No healing can take place without the presence of faith and the holy spirit.”

Mathias agreed in earnest and Tabor nodded to shut him up. The guru suppressed a booming laugh and, instead, let a silent smile curl his lips. Then Mathias opened the door of the house and entered. “Wait here for just a moment while I talk to him.”

When he was inside, Jesus opened his satchel and sorted through his tools. Tabor peeked over to see what all he was carrying. “Where'd you guys get all that stuff?”

“The LORD provides.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, of course. How silly of me.”

From inside the house the men could hear a voice cursing and yelling. “I didn't ask for some quack to come in and steal my money! I already have a worthless bastard sucking me dry!”

“What did I tell you?” Tabor said to the two healers.

Jesus started to say something about how we are all loved by God, but he stopped, and listened to the old man's voice. “He sounds familiar,” Jesus said to his master.

“Have we travelled to this sector of town before?”

“No, never.”

“You ever met someone who acts like they have a camel up their ass?” Tabor said. “Maybe that's what you're thinking of.”

The guru laughed at that one, but Jesus stared at the hut, as if he would recognize the shoddy masonry, the thatch of the roof, or maybe even the mezuzah on the frame. But he didn't. After a long session of yelling and cursing from inside, there was a quiet, and then Mathias emerged.

“He's uh, he's ready.” Mathias rubbed the back of his head and stood aside to let the men inside. “You coming?” he asked Tabor.

“Nah, I'm just going to wait out here. I can't handle his lip right now. My head.”

“When are you going to learn?”

So all but Tabor went inside. When they entered Mathias introduced them.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” bellowed the old blind man. “Why won't you just let me die in peace?”

“I am—”

The guru put a strong hand on Jesus's solar plexus and quieted him in an instant. Jesus knew this meant that he was only to assist today unless his teacher said otherwise.

“We are here to help,” said the guru softly.

“You can help me by getting the hell out of my home!” The old man squawked noisily for someone so frail looking.

The guru ignored this outburst and stepped closer to look down at the man's face. “Jesus, please wash my smallest hooked needle, and Mathias, can you clarify some butter for the bandages?”

“Needle?” said the old man. “Just what kind of demon magic do you plan to use on me, boy?”

“It’ll hurt you if you don’t sit still,” said the guru in that same, almost musical tone. “That’s what the medicine is for— it should relax you enough to—”

“Hear that, son? He’s trying to poison me and steal everything I own!”

The guru looked around the hut at the few dirty plates and empty baskets. The only thing in sight was the man in his bed and his son shrugging his shoulders. “You must keep all the jewels in the lower room,” he said in jest.

“I want them out of my house!” the old man screamed.

Having cleaned the instruments as he was asked, Jesus said, “What will you have me do master?” He stood very close to the guru waiting for his command.

The healer pulled the dropper of corn mint oil from his bag and soaked two small cloth patches. Leaning over to Jesus, he whispered, “You’re going to hold him down as I pat this on his eyes.”

“What are you whispering about over there?”

Before the old man could make any more fuss, Jesus held one hand over his chest and his head with the other. The guru peeled each of his eyelids down one at a time to apply the balm. The old man thrashed and squirmed, but Jesus was much too strong for him to break free.

“You devils!” he cried out.

“Better the devil you know,” Jesus said.

Mathias stared at his guest with a cryptic face. “What do you mean?”

Jesus folded the used cloths and rinsed his hands in the basin. “Your father doesn't remember, but we have met before.”

The guru tilted his head towards the apprentice curiously.

“What? Just who the hell are you? I'll kill you.”

Jesus leaned in close to the bed. “You tried to kill me once already, remember? In Nathan's Grove?” The room was silent. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, and you were once a servant in that area, were you not?”

Mathias looked over and said, “Father, how does he know this?”

Jesus continued, “I was just a boy trying to take some olives. And even though I fell from a tree and begged your forgiveness you beat me with a shepherd's hook!”

“I don't—when...”

“The vapors from the medicine are taking effect,” Jesus said. “But if we are not successful, I want you to hear something before you leave this world.”

“Jesus...” the guru growled out the name in warning. “Calm yourself.”

“Son...see he's trying to... to kill—”

“For many years I wished you had killed me.” A silence pressed itself tightly into the room, filling every crack and every space with muteness. “I wanted that blood to weigh so heavy on your heart that it drove you to some sort of dribbling madness. And I prayed that this would happen.”

“My...son...son...” the old man was fading.

“You need to know that the Lord has punished you for your wickedness!”

The guru grabbed Jesus by the collar and raised his voice. “That's enough!”

And on those words, the man faded away, into a waking oblivion. “Jesus, I’m sorry, I couldn’t have known,” Mathias said. His face was streaked with horror.

“It’s all right,” Jesus said in a huff.

“Yes, Mathias, please don’t trouble yourself over my little dramatist here.” The guru turned to face Jesus. “I will discuss this with you later, but it must wait. Otherwise our anesthetic will wear off.”

“Wait,” Mathias said, “you will still heal him?”

The guru looked perplexed. “Of course I will.” He took the crooked needle from Jesus and moved over to the bed. “Are you capable of holding his left eye open or should I send you outside with Tabor?”

Jesus exhaled his frustration and did as commanded.

“Mathias, would you mind soaking these bandages in the butter?”

The guru and Jesus went to work and Mathias did as he was told with hesitation. “Wait just a second,” he said, “you’re telling me that even though my father tried to kill your apprentice, you are going to give him a gift from heaven? Why help him at all, why not try and kill him?”

Jesus said nothing but he opened his eyes widely for a moment and motioned his brow in agreement.

But the guru smiled, still keeping an eye on his work. “You grew up hearing that a man should take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, is this correct?”

The men both nodded.

“And if someone strikes you, you strike them back, right?” The guru paused and bent down to examine the man’s cloudy eyes. He took the needle and eased it into the

pool of film until the eye let out a gurgling *pop!* The other men cringed but the master healer continued proselytizing. “This may be the will of man, but this is *not* the will of the universe... or God I suppose.”

“But Teacher,” said Jesus, “It is written that—”

“It *should* be written that if a man strikes you, you must turn the other cheek and ask for another.”

Jesus reached over to Mathias without command and clasped a freshly oiled rag. He began to hold the bandage in place, but the guru offered up the tiny needle for a trade.

“Forgiveness is the only thing that can heal the soul,” the guru said. His eyes were piercing into Jesus, trying with all their might to make him understand. Jesus and his master switched places so that the former could work on the other eye. “Here is your chance to heal his blindness,” said the guru, “and to purify your own festering grudges.”

The room grew quiet again as Jesus worked the needle into the other socket as his teacher had. With just a little more time and some quiet coaching from the guru, Jesus punctured the foggy glaze and the slap of the rupturing fluid was heard again. This time the guru reached over to take the second oiled rag from Mathias and placed it on the right eye. He looked up at Jesus and gave him a reassuring smile.

“You two are something special, aren't you?” asked Mathias.

“No more special than you, my friend.” The guru spoke to both of them when he said, “We are all capable of great things if we find the strength to show compassion.”

Mathias just smiled and wrung his hands. After a while he asked, “Is it finished?”

“Nearly,” the guru said. “But now I need your father’s help.” He pinched the ear of the blind man.

“Huh? Who?”

“Listen closely old man,” the guru said, “on the count of three, I need you to blow your nose as hard as you can.”

“Blow on your nose...as hard as we can...can?” His voice was a chord played one note at a time, and his thoughts weren’t all returned.

“Maybe we wait a little longer,” Jesus said.

“What’s going to happen?” Mathias stood up to look at his father.

“One of two things at this point,” the guru said. “Either he can blow the gunk out of his sinuses,” he reached into the satchel as he spoke, “or Jesus here will have to suck it out with this.” The guru held up a thin tube of tapered bronze.”

“Oh,” said a voice from the doorway, “that is disgusting!” Tabor had snuck in without anyone seeing. “How much filth has shot through that little snot-straw?”

The guru set the instrument down on the table. “More than you’d care to know.”

Tabor shivered at the thought and started to walk over to the corner of the hut.

“Unless you’re going to help out,” Mathias said, “you better just go back outside. The healers don’t need you in here cracking jokes.”

“Excuse me!” Tabor said with over-exaggerated attitude. On his way back out he mumbled, “I’m not the one sitting around slurping boogers out of your father...”

“Anyway,” the guru continued, “if we can get the majority of the polluted lens to soften,” he pointed towards the bandages, “that’s what the butter should be doing, then we should be able to evacuate the corrupted parts.” He looked back to Mathias, “and then your father might wake up and be able to see.”

“Might?” asked Mathias.

Jesus looked a little stunned too.

“Yes. I will have done what I can but...”

Jesus spoke in a much calmer voice than before, “After that it’s up to you to keep faith and to pray for him to wake with new light.” Jesus looked back to the old man and his master, his eyes hunting for a sign of approval.

The master healer nodded subtly to his apprentice. To the old man he said, “All right, are you ready now?”

Mathias’s father was still sedated, but he answered more clearly this time.

“Yes...I can hear you...fools.”

Mathias laughed. “Sounds like him. I guess the time is now.”

With needle in hand, the guru said, “All right, I’m going to move the film inward. When I tell you to, blow hard.” He gestured to Jesus to pinch the right nostril shut. After he did, the guru inserted the needle into the punctured lens and pulled the cloudy mass through the vitreous jelly.

“Ok blow!”

Jesus quickly put a cloth under the blind man’s nose as snot and fluid and blood all shot forth.

“Again,” the guru said, “harder!”

With a deep breath the old man tried again. This time he nearly gagged, and the men in the room could hear the choking sound of phlegm clinging to his sinuses. Nearly out of breath and on the verge of passing out, Mathias’s father exhaled one more time in a sharp twist, and the sound of a cork loosening filled the room.

Feeling the weight in his hands, Jesus opened the cloth to view the aborted cataract.

The guru watched as his pupil's face started turning green. He laughed and said, "What are you going to name it, Jesus? Ha-ha!"

"I'm going to be sick..."

"Jesus," said the master with jocularly, "you are healing this man. There's nothing to be squeamish about." He soothed his student with a velvet stare. "All right," he said, "on to the next one."

And when the men had finished the process, the guru instructed Mathias which potion to administer for recovery and how to change the bandages. Once he had done this he told his student to go get some fresh air in his lungs. "And if you use a bush, pick one that's down-wind!"

Jesus laughed a little, though his color was still a bit off. "I will go and check on Tabor."

He walked outside to find Tabor napping in the shade. "Oh, hey there! Just resting my eyes."

Jesus sat down beside him and smiled.

"Is it all done? The old man a young buck again?"

"Well, not quite. I did my part, but he should be sleeping."

"Oh I see, you've done your part and the rest is up to who, exactly? God? Is that it? And so, if this doesn't work, it's not *your* fault. It would be *God's* fault. That's a good strategy, I guess."

"That's not it at all, friend."

“Oh?”

“Are you not from the southern kingdom? Why have you forsaken our Father? Is your life so wretched that you feel like He doesn't love you?”

“Come on, man, give it a rest would you?”

They sat in silence for a bit and Jesus stretched his arms. “Do me one favor,” Jesus finally said. “Believe in the power of our maker, just this once. Just this one time, and if Mathias's father is not healed, you never have to believe again.”

“Ha! You want me to just start believing?”

Jesus grinned. “Yes. I'd like that.”

“Has your master made you think this way? Does he recite the same old tired verses as the rabbis back home or does he make up his own?”

“Actually,” Jesus said, “he leans more toward your line of thinking. This is just something I know in my core.” He paused for a moment. “I've seen enough miracles in my time here to know that the Lord is as real as a mother's kiss.”

Tabor was quiet for a while. “And you will leave me alone forever if it doesn't work?”

“That's right. What have you got to lose?”

Tabor shrugged. “Well, what do I have to do?”

Jesus patted him on the back and said, “Just pray with me. Your voice is as good as mine.” Jesus assumed his guru's familiar posture and became comfortable in the pose. “And be honest with the LORD. Let your heart be naked.”

So the two sat like the dirt outside the hut, under the shade of a low tree. Jesus hummed his low notes of prayer and Tabor tried his best to keep his eyes shut and

focused. But after a few moments, he would scratch and itch or move his feet or indulge some other such irritation like a child in the synagogue. But after a long while, a voice called from inside, “Jesus, come in, come in! He's stirring!”

Jesus opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He stood, winked at Tabor, and walked inside.

“I'll be damned,” Tabor said.

Inside the house lay the grumpy old man grumbling about thieves and murderers. “Should we take away the cloth?” Mathias asked.

“Wait,” the guru said. “The room must be darkened as much as possible or else it will damage his eyes.” The men began covering the windows with anything they could find as Jesus peeled away the rags. When the room was dark, Jesus removed the final cloth and moved Mathias to the edge of the bed. The old man searched and blinked and rubbed his eyes. “I can—I can see something.”

“It's me, Father, it's your son.”

“No,” he whispered, “I see something else.” He kept blinking and moving his head around, staring into the floating golden dust above the room. His voice could barely be heard at all now. “It's so...*beautiful*.”

The guru put his arm around Jesus's shoulders and patted him on the chest.

Mathias grabbed his father's hands and knelt beside him.

The old man's eyes were streaming with cool and quiet tears. “So, so beautiful.”

Mixing potions and fusing tonics was much more difficult work than scraping at the flesh of vegetables, but Jesus persevered. Although many of his days were filled with

the puff of sulfurous failure from the cauldron of his workings, Jesus kept mixing and kept dissolving ingredients, until he could create something he could measure against his master's work.

And the guru was always there, carefully watching his student. One hand poised for a frustrated smack of condemnation, the other at the ready with a handshake of congratulations.

And there were many more foraging trips in the wilderness, much more cataloguing of strange flowers, gnarled roots, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and life-sustaining seeds to the brink of what Jesus complained about as monotony, but the guru answered in his own master's words by saying "Surgery is mutilation, not doctoring. Any steps we can take to avoid the invasion of the body are acts of servitude and humility."

And there were many more trips to the ruins of Old Babylon, many more minor surgeries, therapies, object lessons, and treatments, to the point of what Jesus might call tedium, but the guru answered in his master's own words by saying "Theory without practice is like a one-winged bird—incapable of flight."

So Jesus practiced and practiced until many tasks became second nature to him. But there was a test that he had yet to encounter, or even foresee, one that all healers must be prepared to face. The winds had grown colder, and the darkness of the evenings swallowed up the setting sun more quickly. But Jesus and his master were still in Old Babylon, still trying desperately to assuage the ailments of a man much older than the guru. He was crippled in his bed, wracked with fever, and swollen at his lymph nodes. Jesus had prepared a tonic for him, but the stubborn, white-haired man refused to drink anything, afraid of the water.

The guru tried in vain to cool the old man's body temperature, but every cold rag became burning hot, and every cold breeze gave spine-wrenching chills. When the two men failed to manipulate the old man's chakra, when there was no potion or tincture left, when every technique they could think of had been exhausted, Jesus and his master joined in prayer. But not long after, as the smoke from the incense was sucked out the crack in the door and window, so too was the life drawn out of this old man. Jesus watched as the eyes changed from the color of struggle to the dim hue of desertion. It was happening all over again—despite all of his training and all of his fervent belief—it was happening all over again.

As Jesus indulged his own selfish wistful tears, he took no notice of the guru leaving the hut and reentering. "Let us go," he said to his student. "There is nothing else we can do."

Jesus stood to leave, as he had already packed all the tools hours before.

"Hang on," said the guru, "here, drape this over him." The healer handed off a long sheet. "This man has no family. The neighbors next door said they checked on him, but he has no kin here." The guru walked over to the body and helped Jesus tuck the sheet around him. "I told the villagers that we would bury him."

At first, Jesus felt a genuine pang of esteem for his guru, but then he thought again. "But Master," he said, "where are we to bury him?"

"We'll take him back with us. Now hurry."

"Master," Jesus said again, "how are we supposed to take him?"

The guru quickly tucked the sheet around and pulled the second from under the corpse. "We will carry him. Now lift up on your end and don't drop it."

“But it is nearly dark already. We would be pressed for time even if we did not have this extra burden. How will—”

“All the more reason for us to hurry. Now pick him up,” said the guru.

So Jesus did what he was told, and they carried the dead weight through the hills and the darkness, in the cold and in the mystery of the wilderness until their arms were numb. When it was dim enough for the guru not to see his face, Jesus let stream down the tears of the past, the tears he dammed up those many years ago that he should have shed for Joseph. Instead he shed them for this dead and nameless stranger.

The next morning he awoke to the sounds of his master’s call. “Wake up,” he said, “we have lots of work to do.”

Jesus rubbed the crust from his eyes and yawned, but he was not truly awake until he saw his master holding a scalpel instead of a shovel. Confused, he asked, “Guru, where will we bury this man?” For the night, they had left the man covered in his wrappings and under the shelter of the tent with the two of them, so Jesus pointed toward where he rested.

The guru creased his brow. “Jesus,” he said calmly, “you don’t truly believe that’s why we carried him this whole way...do you?”

Jesus stood up and looked at the corpse. Before he went to sleep the man was just resting on the floor covered by a sheet. But now the body had been placed atop a long wooden plank and tethered to it in three spots with thick rope. “Master? What is this?”

The guru placed the scalpel back on the palette instead of handing it to his student. “You wouldn’t touch the boar,” the old man said, “so I couldn’t teach you about the physical internal medicine.”

“No,” Jesus heard himself scream. “No, no, no...”

“Jesus,” the guru said sharply. “Listen to me. The biggest part of healing is knowledge. Faith is important too, but knowledge is paramount. In order to know what the body is, you must see it, hold it, understand its intricacies.”

“You want me to ravage this man’s body.”

The guru shook his head slowly. “I want you to *dissect* it. It is the only way to learn.”

Jesus heaved a sigh and crashed back down to his mat, clenching his head in his palms. “It’s disrespectful, it is not honoring the dead. I won’t do it.”

The guru sat down beside his student and lowered his voice. “Do you remember how I taught you about the soul and the body?”

Jesus said nothing.

“Well, this man’s soul has already transmuted. His essence still exists in this world in a thousand different iterations. But we are looking at his body. And like the rock that is crushed to dust, this body too will find new purpose. But it is up to you to decide if that purpose is knowledge that can help you save your people, or if it is to be food for worms.”

Jesus stood up again, unwilling to look at his teacher or the dead body.

“Do not let this man’s death be for nothing,” said the old man. “Let him help you.”

“Enough!” Jesus shouted.

After a pause the old healer said, “Very well, then. I’ll fetch us a breakfast and then we can take a walk.” The rest of the morning was silent except for the crunching of seeds and nuts between molars. When the two had finished eating, the guru stood up and said, “Come, let us go.”

The rushing water that morning was icy cold, and the sun was bright, but its white shine did little to warm the flesh. Nonetheless, the guru, determined to deliver his message, waded out into the current until it was near his knees. The first words either of them spoke after leaving the tent that morning were when the guru called to Jesus, “Come, join me.”

Jesus looked out and then tested the water with his toe. “Master,” he yelled, “it is too cold. Let’s return to the fire.”

But the guru remained steadfast and unyielding. He would stand there all day until Jesus did what was asked of him. Walking into the freezing rapids, Jesus felt the rush of pain grip his joints. First those of his toes and then tight around his ankles. Maybe it was the hue of daybreak, but he could swear that he saw his skin turning blue.

When he reached the spot where the guru was standing, Jesus looked up only to find that his master had waded into deeper waters.

“Come join me, young apprentice,” called out the old man. The water was rushing above his waist at that point.

“Master,” Jesus called out again in frustration, “that’s too deep and too cold. Let’s return to the tent.” Again his pleas were unheard, so Jesus began to trudge deeper into the

numbing liquid. Soon his skin felt as if it were breaking apart one tiny grain at a time. Soon all that would be left was chilled bone. Finally, Jesus caught up with the guru in a spot where they were both nearly chest deep.

The young apprentice shivered and chattered his teeth in the river while the old man wore that same stoic grin.

“I understand your hesitation in dissecting the cadaver,” said the guru. “But I brought you out here to ask you a question.”

“Cou-Cou-couldn’t you have asked in the t-t-tent?” Jesus asked through a shaking face.

The guru smiled and shook his head. “Do you want to save your people?” he asked calmly.

“What?”

“I said, do you want to save your people?”

The guru’s voice grew louder and into something more familiar to Jesus, but he couldn’t place it.

“Do you want to truly help them?”

“Yes,” Jesus said. “Of co-co-course I do.”

And then he felt it, a grip as tight and as strong as John’s clenching fists. In that moment the world was a whispered sapphire, an undulating darkness that pulsed with bubbles of clarity. In the next moment, the world was frost and dripping wet fear. The world was a screaming voice in Jesus’s ear. “When you want to help your people, when you *need* to heal your people in the same way you *need* to breathe, this is when you will be ready to save them!”

And the bolstering strength of the guru plunged Jesus's body back into the depths of the throbbing blizzard river. This time Jesus thrashed his arms and legs to no avail. He tried to scream only to swallow gulps of arctic water, only to choke on his own inadequacies. And just before everything faded to black, just before the glistening squiggles of his vision overtook him, Jesus saw the wriggling toes stationed on the river bed. With his last bit of vitality, Jesus stomped his master's foot with all his might, and struck at his groin for a dishonorable chance at freedom. At last, he could breathe.

While he was panting in the open, frigid air, Jesus heard a voice from the void of life.

"You see, you were willing to do anything to catch your breath. Why are you not also willing to do anything to help you bring life to your native land?"

Jesus rubbed at his eyes and bounced up and down in the current, far away from where his master stood, now posing on the shore. He tried his best to swim, but ended up paddling and crawling to the riverbank. Where before he was freezing, Jesus now felt comfortably numb, and a gentle sensation of warmth overtook him.

"Do *not* fall asleep." The guru's voice ruptured any chance at serenity. "You hear me?" He slapped Jesus across the cheek and grabbed him by the shoulder to make him sit up straight. "Look at me," he said. "And listen well. This will be the only time I say this. You are not responsible for your father's death."

Jesus felt his eyes widen and his head shake in protest.

"You think I don't hear you cry out in your night terrors? You think I haven't seen what you fear?" The old man knelt down in front of Jesus and put a hand on his

shoulders. “People only die if you let them, only if you believe in an ending. You have to know this by now.”

Jesus felt the wind roll and rumble through his ears, and he heard the earth spinning, rubbing its sandy back against the sky.

The guru held him tight in an embrace and said to Jesus, “It’s not your fault. So quit grasping at your memories so tightly.” The old man pulled away and stood up, gleaming in the light of day. “This day will be the crux of your time here.” The hermit started walking towards his tent and called back. “Return to me only when you are ready to learn and train seriously.” He took a few more steps and turned. “And if you decide that you are finished with me, float your body down this stream until you find the answers that you seek.”

Jesus shivered in the cold loneliness of the riverbank. With his master gone, he could only face himself and the world pressing in around him. Jesus stood, writhing after the dissipation of his near-death euphoria. And that old anger that always managed to pinch the inside of his skin rose to the surface once more. Without realizing it, Jesus found himself kicking at the water and throwing any stick or stone he could find with all his strength. But when he was out of breath, and when the ripples of the water smoothed out once more to the steady flow, Jesus saw a face in the water that appeared to be very different from the reflection he witnessed that day at the Jordan. This man was slightly older, but his frame and the tautness of his skin all suggested a determination more than any sort of stress. And as he was staring, Jesus noticed a flicker, as if a tiny sun exploded in different places, a glittering in the current, and then it was gone. He wondered if this

were the angel that his master taught him about, if this were Samael lurking in the aether, waiting for Jesus to decide what kind of man he would choose to be.

Who have you ever been?

What kind of man will you become?

Who do you wish to be?

Jesus truly had no answer for his own questions until he felt the canvas of the tent flap clenched in his grip, until his nose embraced the stench of the slow-rotting corpse, until his apologetic eyes met his master's. "I'm ready," is all he could say through his trembling frostbitten lips.

With warm arms, the guru welcomed back his student whom he loved like a son and prepared him a soft place next to the fire.

So Jesus held a heart in his hands and inspected the circuitry of veins and arteries and sliced through kidneys and bowels and sutured all the gaps he created for hour after hour until finally, the stench of decay was too much for either man to bear. Jesus saved some face by observing the ritualistic oiling of the body and the recitation of common funeral prayers, but a small part of him still felt as if he betrayed the nameless man.

In the coming months, however, Jesus came to realize just what a gift that body had been.

"Today we have a long journey," said the guru. "I have all of the medicines we might need, but you should pack many provisions."

Jesus did as he was told, and when he was finished, the two men set off. Jesus was not in the habit of questioning his master, so he remained silent as they passed through the town where they conducted most of their work. He also stayed quiet as they continued through the outskirts and to lands farther than Jesus had ever ventured.

When they stopped for water, Jesus finally spoke up. “Guru,” he said, “we have never been this far. I don’t think there are any people who would live this far away from the city.”

The guru gulped the cold water from a rolling stream and wiped his mouth. He smiled that gaping hole and said, “Many who live here would agree.”

Jesus did not press for a meaning to the cryptic remark. He knew his master would speak when ready.

After they had walked many steps in the silence of the sun, the guru continued. “I have shown you many things and asked you to perform many tasks. But today’s work is more of a test than anything else.” The guru stopped and checked his direction by looking to the sky. When he started to walk again he said, “I have asked you to face death, to handle corpses. And with some hesitation, you have done this despite your religion.”

The apprentice smiled. He could hear the affection in his master’s voice. They had been together for a very long time now and Jesus felt nearly at peace in his company.

“But today I’m going to ask of you something that few men in this world would agree to.”

Over the hill in front of them, Jesus could see a few rundown huts coated in dust. Wild dogs circled the area, sniffing out old bones and waiting for new ones.

“Today our aim is to help those who are trapped between the world of the living and that of the dead. Those who find home only in the darkness of lonesomeness.”

“Guru?”

Past the abandoned huts snaked a small game path leading up to the mouth of a large cave. The master healer pointed at the rocky mouth. “Today you will come face to face with the scourge of your homeland.”

Jesus stared into the distance with confused eyes. Then he heard it. The low rumbling hum of words echoing out from the structure. *Unclean...Unclean*. Jesus looked to his teacher. “Is this...are we?”

The guru nodded slowly. “Today you will know the lepers. And today—you will love them.”

The guru marched along the path with the same lilt in his step as if he were hurrying inside for a feast. But Jesus trailed behind him; his eyes bore into the dust beneath his sandals and he stopped frequently.

Finally, when they were nearly in reach of the cave, Jesus called out, “Wait, please.”

The guru turned to face his student.

“We can’t go in there.” Jesus stepped back as if some hissing miasma of contagion emanated from the rock formation. “These men have been cursed by God for their deeds. That is what I have been taught.”

The old man sighed. “How can I put this tired belief of yours to rest?” The guru hung his head and took a short step toward Jesus. “If this is true, and I do say *if*, then the creator has also made the two of us for the forgiveness of sins.”

Jesus crinkled his face. “Only the Father has this authority. Are you saying that you know the will of the Divine?”

“I am saying that you and I have both restored countless others who were ailing. And if it is willed by the Divine, then the son of man can cleanse these lepers as well as anyone else.”

Jesus’s ears tingled when he heard that familiar expression, one that he hadn’t encountered since Galilee. And immediately, he knew his master’s meaning. Jesus heard again the words that the guru spoke the day they cured the old man’s blindness: *we are all capable of great things if we find the strength to show compassion.*

For a moment, Jesus felt a softness, a swooning within him, but the moment passed and he blurted out, “It’s just that, well, I won’t have to actually *touch* them, will I?”

The guru let out a gusty little chuckle and shook his head in disbelief. He turned on his heels and started walking. “Don’t you know that an embrace is the cure for leprosy?”

Jesus’s eyes widened with fright. Then, with a quick vehemence he called after his master, still clambering up the hill, “But they are filthy! What if we become infected? Their kind stay in caves for a reason, you know! And I truly believe that we are destined to help but—”

Before he could finish speaking, Jesus caught the eye of an old man at the edge of the cave. His face was red and swollen, and his arms covered with liver-spots. He was listening to every word. Jesus saw the marks on his skin at first glance, but the longer he looked at this man, really looked at him, the more he began to understand his guru's words. Jesus saw the eyes of his own kin, his countrymen, even though he might as well be on the other side of the world. And as Jesus started to feel the burning pain of remorse, the afflicted man retreated into the shadows.

“Wait,” the guru called, “we’re here to help!”

But he was gone.

“Great,” he said, “look what you’ve done.”

“I’m sorry, master.”

“Don’t apologize to me! And don’t repent with words either.” The guru walked on the pads of his feet into the mouth of the cave with Jesus following behind until it became darker.

“I don’t see anyone,” said Jesus.

“Hello?” called the guru.

“We are healers,” said Jesus. Their pleas echoed through the rock. “Maybe they don’t want to be bothered,” he said to the guru. “We should go.”

He started to walk back when his master said “Wait!” He turned to face Jesus. “When a father is waiting for his son to return, would he not stare into the darkness until he could see? I would do this for you and you for me, so why should we not for this man?” He stopped and didn’t say anything. And after a short silence, the raspy voices of

many chorused through the rocks. *Unclean...Unclean...* The word murmured in the darkness, a rehearsed and depleted bass note. *UNCLEAN!*

The chanted word of warning grew louder and more imperative the longer the men stood there. But after the master healer made it clear that he would not be moved, the voices died out and returned to the darkness. And after many moments, the squeak of one desperate plea cut through the air. “Are you truly a cleric? A holy man?”

Jesus was frightened and jumped behind the guru searching the darkness for the voice.

“I am,” said the master. “And I have brought my student with me who is also touched by God.” His words echoed and bounced and sank into shadows. “If you believe, show yourself to me and we will cleanse you.”

Silence. No sight nor sound nor thought of motion. But then, the hoarse voice said, “You do not want to see.”

This time it was Jesus who spoke, echoing his teacher’s words. “Just as the Father loves all of his children, so too do I love all my brothers. Now come into the light if you believe.”

After a while, the soft plod of timid bare feet sounded on the rocky floor. The sound grew louder until a shadowy outline could be seen. When the old man moved close enough, the apprentice shuddered at his appearance. This wasn’t the man who they saw before. This man’s skin was boil on top of boil, scab upon scab. Some sores oozed puss and some were dried over with blood. Most of his arms were scratched raw and his legs swollen with fist-sized welts. Every time he moved, he trembled from pain. When the

man's face came into the light, all that could be seen was his dirty white beard, but when he lifted his head, the old man revealed crimson eyes burning with constant tears.

This man is too far gone! Jesus wanted to shout. The voice inside him screamed, *He will taint us both!*

But his terror was grounded by his guru's soothing voice. "I will go and gather dry brush for a small fire. Jesus, keep our new friend company. I will return quickly."

Jesus, red-faced and stone-legged, did as he was told and stood completely still. After a silence that lasted much too long, he finally came to his senses and spoke up. "I'm...I'm sorry about, well, I mean...if you heard...before." He cleared his throat and realized that he wasn't looking the man in the eyes. But then when Jesus looked at his face he thought it best not to stare, so he shot his glance back down to his own feet in embarrassment. Feeling the dread of the silence again, Jesus stammered. "Do you have a name?"

The ailing man breathed in deep and wiped his eyes. "I am called Eli."

"I am Jesus," he returned in a stilted tone. "From Nazareth. It's far away from here. The other man is my guru. He says he doesn't believe in names because all titles and honors belong to God, and I think that's interesting, but I like having a name, and it—"

Jesus's rambling was interrupted by a dusty question.

"Are you afraid of me?" Eli asked him.

The apprentice looked up at the grotesque figure, the walking rotting man. And with a trembling whisper he answered, "Yes."

Eli did not show any signs of hurt by this answer. In fact, it appeared to Jesus that the man might have moved the muscles in his face to nearly form a smile. “This is good,” he said. “Tell me, what is it like? To be afraid.”

Jesus was speechless. He opened his mouth but no words emerged.

“Please,” said the man in earnest, “tell me what it feels like to fear.”

The student thought for a moment and finally spoke. “My chest feels tight. And it’s hard to breathe. I don’t want to breathe because I feel like I might get sick from the air...and all I want to do is run away from here, but my feet won’t budge.”

This time, Eli truly did smile. “Fear is for those with something to lose. Something worth cherishing.” Quickly his expression returned to its normal abject stare. “I have been here, like this, for so long that I...” he paused and was so silent that Jesus didn’t know if he would continue. Finally he said, “I had nearly forgotten the sensation.”

Before Jesus could even feel the weight of these words, the guru returned with a bundle of kindling. “I will build the fire over here. Jesus? Please take my cloak and make a pallet near the entrance.” He looked now to Eli, “Do you have a mat, sir?”

Eli nodded.

“Good, bring it here and we will be ready to begin.”

Eli started to turn, but he stopped, “No one has ever been so kind to me as you, a stranger.” He smiled at the guru and then at Jesus and started to tear up again. “Even if you cannot heal me, I thank you.”

Still feeling like his soul could not govern his body, Jesus stared as the man walked back into the darkness.

“He won’t be thanking you in a few minutes if you can’t clear your mind,” said the guru from the smoldering birth of fire.

But Jesus was still frozen in time; fear had settled into his joints.

The guru opened up his satchel and said, “Come and tell me what we should use.” This command yielded no results. “Jesus,” said the master healer.

The student wrested himself from his anxious paralysis. Turning to see his master waiting with impatience, Jesus finally spoke. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just—”

“It’s nothing. Now come over here and show me what we need.”

Jesus did as he was told. Every muscle movement and every motion helped break him from his petrified state. Once he peered into the leather medicine bag his mind reawakened to its purpose, and his training set in. He pulled out a handful of plants and herbs and arranged them precisely. White cedar bark to be bundled, dried leaves of the Tree of Life, a small jar of goat fat, Corsican Hellebore and Setterwort. Each was placed neatly in a line, one by one, accompanied with the scalpel or mortar and pestle he would use with it. When Jesus spread the cloak on the ground, his guru instructed that he find some soft dirt and mix water into it to make mud. After the fire was stoked, he told Jesus to find green branches and collect them. And when Eli returned with his mat, the surgery began.

Instinctively, Jesus and the guru prayed the mantra of *Om Nashi Me* over Eli’s reclining body while they fumigated the cave with the smoking white cedar. The odor of the clouding smoke relaxed Jesus and helped him see the world as he needed to. Eli was the earth, the guru was the sun, and Jesus was prepared to be the wind and the breeze, unseen but powerful, or he was ready to be the cleansing waters above and below the

firmament. This is how surgery should be according to his lessons. When the fumigation process was complete, Jesus administered fortified wine laced with Boswellia oil to anesthetize his patient the best he could. But every time the guru's hot knife lanced another puss-filled welt, Eli's high-pitched screams proved this to be to no avail.

"Jesus," his master called out, "search my bag for the Astragalus root."

The apprentice did as he was told. No sooner did he hand it to the guru than did the guru shove the root into Eli's mouth. "Bite down," he commanded. The healer continued to focus on the legs where he had started, knowing that the extremities would bleed less freely. But as the guru sliced open the festering sores nearer to the man's core, he instructed Jesus to ignite some of the smaller green branches. "When you have them smoldering, carefully burn this as well." He handed his student what looked to be a five-pointed open rose. The flower had a sickly greenish white tinge about it. "When both are smoking, blow the vapors across his wounds." Jesus started to do as he was asked but paused when he heard the seriousness in the healer's voice. "But be careful not to breathe in the fumes, understand?"

The guru continued to make his measured incisions with his smallest bronze scalpel, peeling away the dead flesh with his forceps and depositing the material into an empty bowl. "Once the bleeding slows, begin crushing these leaves with the pestle until they are fine." He gestured towards the dried Tree of Life tips. After making another cut, he reached into his bag and pulled forth a collection of thyme and green aloe to give to Jesus as well. "Then add these to the mixture. Once I finish with the legs and the blood is clotted sufficiently, you must mix equal parts mud and goat fat into it to create a poultice."

After a large part of flesh was cut and drained, Jesus watched as his master rubbed Balm of Gilead onto Eli with his bare hands in that same serpentine motion he had used on Jesus's own wounds. Then he showed Jesus how to properly cake on the sealing dirt mixture. Jesus hesitated, and then began to apply it with a wooden spoon, still afraid to touch the oozing, breathing corpse.

But upon seeing the seriousness in his master's eyes, upon seeing and hearing the pain radiating from Eli, Jesus abandoned the spoon. He tried to make his own shaking hands mimic his guru's gentle slithering salve of a touch. And when Jesus came skin to skin with this leper, this half-dead abomination, a shock of realization sparked behind his skull. This was a *man* he was touching, and his name was Eli.

Cut, scream, drain, smoke, mix, rub, repeat.

Cut, scream, drain, smoke, mix, rub, repeat.

This went on for nearly a quarter of the day until Eli's body was caked with what was then dried dirt. When it was finished, the guru instructed his disciple to fetch some fresh water from the nearby stream.

As he left the cave and the guru washed his hands, Eli's faint voice said, "I see an angel watching over us."

The master healer looked down at the tired face of Eli and laughed lightly, "That's not always such a great thing."

Eli closed his eyes and whispered, "Yes it is." He inhaled deeply and said it again. "Yes it is."

With the patient now in a relaxed slumber, and with the panic of surgery at an end, the guru could now privately tend to the source of the man's ailment. He gently grabbed Eli around the torso and scooped him up. Placing his back against a stump and propping him up with the inflated satchel, he could now reach the vital points of his patient with better precision. From around his neck the guru pulled the vial he always kept, still glowing with the dark yellow luster that haunted Jesus's nightmares. From the tiny pouch around his waist, the master healer plucked his thin sharpened needles one at a time, passing them through the small flame of the fire before placing them in a clean dish. Once they were all cool again, he dipped the ends of the first needle into the vial, coating the tips with the glistening venom. But before he could administer the toxin, he was interrupted by an audible gasp from the cave entrance.

Jesus, witnessing his teacher attempting to stab darts into the neck of what appeared to be a skinned carcass, stammered, "Master, what...what are you doing? Did we fail? Why are you using poison?" His voice was elevated by his nervousness and it was loud enough to rouse Eli.

"What..." he started to cough out. Seeing the needle and the vial he said, "What are you doing to me? Get back!"

"Teacher!" Jesus yelled. He had no other words that could spew forth as loudly from his gaping mouth.

Eli started to squirm and struggle despite the burning absence of flesh, trying desperately to wriggle away from his captor. But the guru held out a firm hand and gripped the man above his right collarbone in one slow, smooth motion. "Trust your Lord," he said in a harmonious voice. And with these three words and a simple smile, the

master healer tranquilized Eli back into a slumbering pose, and Jesus stood watching in silence. “Did you bring the water? This is thirsty work.”

Jesus just nodded, his eyes still wide as the heavens.

The guru smiled at his student and motioned him to come over. “Remember what I told you the day we collected this venom?”

Jesus nodded again. “Yes, that it’s not always deadly.”

“That’s right. And in this amount,” he gestured towards the point of the needle, “this venom might actually cure the source of this man’s sickness.” He handed the shining pin to his student. “But only if you put it in *exactly* the right spots.” The guru took the canteen of fresh water and poured some down his gullet.

Jesus held the needle far away from himself like it might combust at any moment. He was still standing above the two.

“Can’t do much from up there,” said his teacher. “Come sit in my place here.”

Jesus sat down but shook his head. “Master, I cannot do this. I haven’t practiced enough.”

“Yes you have; now say nothing more. He must not wake.”

The fearful student’s bones were quivering, his marrow churning, until he heard that familiar and beautiful song buzz through the air. Without looking, he knew his guru was behind him, eyes closed, and praying. And his voice was not only steady and melodious, but it was in tune with the song of the stones, and the song of the stream. His guru sang the world into a stable vision, one in which Jesus could do what was asked of him. And with the dexterity earned from all those hungry days of training, Jesus punctured Eli’s neck at the governor vessel, the conception vessel, and the stomach

meridian, effectively administering the healing poison of the desert viper into the chakra stream of the ailing man. This student of the Babylonian guru, the child who ran from Nazareth, on this day transformed once more: with the old leper's head cradled in his lap, Jesus became a mother nursing her child.

Suddenly, after his experience with Eli in the cave, Jesus was preparing and eating his meals as fast as his master, sometimes faster. He struggled no longer with brewing even the most complex of the guru's recipes and prescribed them as easily as he might quench his thirst with water. Emergency care and surgery were also becoming more fluid with the young apprentice, and the guru smiled as he saw Jesus hugging more of his patients and calling them by name. Most importantly, for the first time since he arrived, Jesus was not afraid to speak freely of his past. He was not afraid to meditate for long periods, to look inward at the roots of his own suffering, and to treat his own soul as he might treat a diseased patient.

"Master," Jesus said one day, "I have waited all this time to ask, but I can wait no longer."

The guru sat cross-legged in his familiar pose, pipe dangling from the lower lip of a curious face.

"What is the meaning of our mantra? What does *Om Nashi Me* truly mean?"

The old man smiled and blew a stream of smoke toward his student. "It is dangerous to put these things into other words when the original heals just fine."

Jesus nodded. "I know. I just wanted... I just remember how invigorated I felt when I first awoke to those words."

The guru laughed and cocked his head on its side, studying Jesus's eyes. "*Om Nashi Me... Oh Infinite Nakedness.*"

Jesus squinted and tried to understand.

"This life is all-encompassing, something that you cannot hold in your arms, but you can see it so clearly if you understand how to look."

That night Jesus thought about the guru's words, all of them. And he recalled a moment in their travels when his master described how the world was on the cusp of some great change, some turbulent metamorphosis. But then the darkness of his eyelids overtook him, and the world slipped into the silhouettes of dancing dreams.

The darkness quaked all around him, harder and faster, more violent perturbations until the ground and sky fractured beneath the other's atom-bending force. The quickening. And then, this great trembling that surrounded him ceased. From the darkness, Jesus could see only the gleaming light of polished silver, and the crimson gush of a severed head. There was a ghoulish silence throughout the wilderness as the trees and sands dared not speak. But from the depths of the planet arose a swarm of locusts, each of their wings beating faster and faster, humming and buzzing into a clamor too loud to escape. They overwhelmed him, and Jesus awakened to lifeless night and a stomach churning. The taste of escape lingered on his tongue.

“Are you sure that this is what you must do?” The guru stood at the roadside's edge, his back to the tent, staring into the determined face of the man who was once his fledgling student.

Jesus smiled at his teacher and said, “You have taught me well enough to know that I am sure.” Jesus looked toward the west and remembered how long the journey was in front of him. “You said it yourself, Master, dreams are not things to be ignored.”

The guru put a hand on Jesus's shoulder. “I just don't understand why you feel this obligation to them. Why Judea? Why Palestine, even? Could you not serve your Lord by tending to the needs of the ailing here?”

Jesus looked back at the old man with those same eyes that the guru used to glare at him with. “They are my people.”

The guru nodded. He could see that there was no arguing.

“Come with me,” Jesus whispered. “We can do much more good together.”

For the first time all morning, the guru smiled, and then he let out one of his famous roars of a laugh that bounced and echoed through the dust. “And what if I am away from my tent when some would-be-messiah comes looking for me to teach him astronomy?”

The two men laughed and, as much as they didn't want to, embraced one another tightly for the last time. “Are you sure you want me to take so much?” Jesus asked. He held up the satchel full of potions and tools that his master had gifted to him.

“I only wish I had more to give,” said the guru. “Forage as you go, and test anything unfamiliar. You never know what blessings the Earth will yield in your time of

need.” The old man squinted from a grin at his double meaning. “The sun is setting, young one.”

“I know, Master,” he said, “I know.” Jesus started to walk down the path toward the distant horizons. But before he took more than a few steps he heard the much more severe resonance of his teacher's voice rumble from behind him.

“Jesus,” he said, “one final warning.”

The young apprentice turned to view his master's grave face. He was reminded of the voice of John, but there was something...more.

“Do not fall victim to pride or to your anger.” He took a long breath. “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” The guru seemed taller now, almost floating off the ground, and his beard a whiter tint.

Jesus twisted the muscles in his face. “Master?”

“Your first vision, your fever dream brought on by the bitter lettuce, this was a vision for a prophet.” The guru studied his student's face and walked towards him with a gait that was not his own. “But you know this, don't you?”

Jesus hesitated and finally nodded in silence.

“Then you know all too well your fate should you return to your homeland.”

From his pack the guru removed an alabaster jar that he had concealed. Jesus had never seen this in all the time they were together. But before he could ask, Jesus felt the warmth of his master's thumb upon his forehead, and the smoothness of a rich oil. “For all the days of your life, you must speak so that they may not listen, teach so that they may not understand.”

Jesus listened to the words, let them weigh upon his flesh and settle in his heart. As they did, their meaning coursed through his bloodstream, and the mark his guru had made upon his brow started to burn like a star. His mind's eye took him to his baptism by the Jordan. He remembered the hollowness of it all, the wanting. But then his master's words echoed within his frame, soaring through him on the wings of a dove. This sensation and the tongue of fire lapping at his crown caused Jesus to plummet to the earth, kneeling in the presence of something greater than himself. His eyelids squeezed themselves shut. "Are you...can it be that...?"

"I am the one to make the way clear," said the guru's voice. "But you are the son who must walk the path."

Jesus was being pressed by the universe from all sides, the air around him was a shrinking womb, and in the embrace of implosion, he focused on that one word: *son*. In an instant, he saw the warm smile of Joseph and felt the embrace of his master and heard the praises of the most high.

When he finally opened his eyes, all trace of the guru had vanished, and the light of day was much dimmer than it had been. With a final subtle bowing of his anointed head, he turned to walk westward, kicking up the dust with his heels as he marched on, never again to be truly alone.

Jesus walked day and night through foreign lands and untamed wilderness, gathering herbs along his way and studying the stars as his master had taught him. In the long journey he met many other pilgrims, ascetics, and radicals—all of them had something new to teach him, all of them had some new way of life for him to savor.

Every step, every camp, every breath was meditation, fasting, and praying, but the long road before him still echoed with the unsettling last words his guru had spoken.

Then one day, after many long ones, the universe made a familiar sound: the splash of water lapping at dirty ankles. Jesus felt the old waters of the River Jordan once more, and once he took his mind away from his meditations, he saw all the same disciples. But now their robes were torn and their hair dusted with ashes. The men and women of the poor villages travelled here as they always had, but now they came to mourn. The rumors and the dreams had all been correct, John the Baptizer had been murdered. All these mourning men and women were turned to lambs, sheep without a shepherd and children without a father. The pitiful lot cried out a sound that Jesus had nearly forgotten: the death wail that throttled in his own gut the night of Joseph's passing. They were all orphans, floating in the morning mist of the river.

Jesus saw this crowd and hesitated. He wanted desperately to help them, to heal them, to restore their faith, but he remembered his own beliefs those years ago when he left his home. These strange, familiar faces all wore the hardships of the region and the orthodoxy of his Jewish upbringing. The strap of his satchel dug deep into his shoulder, and he ached to share his knowledge with the people, but he knew that he must speak with them as they would expect a prophet to, not a travelling sorcerer. Galilean superstition would surely damn him, but Galilean desperation would raise him up to a place from which he could truly help his people. Jesus waded into the depths of the water. "Is it true?" he shouted through the wailing. "Is it true that the Baptist is no longer in our midst?"

A voice answered him through the crowd, a face like all the other faces, a body like all the other torn bodies. “You must be a stranger,” he said, “for it has been long since Herod Antipas has captured the prophet.” Another voice from the crowd picked up the thought and continued. “He was imprisoned, and just last week we were told that no one was allowed to visit him.” Still yet another voice from the crowd spoke in a more trembling tone. “We fear,” it paused to breathe, “we fear that he has since been executed.”

Jesus looked on dumbly at the group. “For what crime would this man have been murdered?”

“For speaking the true word of our Lord!”

“The Romans are to blame for this!” This was a war cry that many answered.

“He is no king of mine!” Many agreed with this as well. And the crowd began to swell into a mob, right before Jesus’s eyes.

“Brothers and sisters,” he said. They were still arguing among themselves, pointing fingers, crying and stamping the mud. Jesus heard the cool and calm tone of his voice, and remembered the way in which the preachers of Nazareth used to command a crowd. He remembered how John’s voice could do this, and began again. “Brothers and sisters!” he cried out.

And the wilderness fell silent once more, the people, the waters, the trees all leaned in to listen to the stranger in the depths.

“You all have come here to mourn for the loss of your master, but you must rejoice instead!”

The disciples became quieter and listened to Jesus. "Why would we praise the murder of a prophet? What kind of blasphemer are you?"

Jesus smiled gently. "Many will be persecuted, many will perish, and many will suffer here on Earth because they hold steadfast to the word of the scriptures." Jesus raised his hands into the air and spoke louder. "But I say to you, John has done what he was sent to do! The kingdom of heaven truly is at hand, and if you seek to enter it, follow me."

A man stood and raised his fist. "How dare you come here and besmirch the words of our leader. Who are you to speak such things?"

Jesus looked perplexed, and he nearly said nothing. But a surge of inspiration boiled from within him, and a mystifying answer came to his lips. "I am," he said, "I am the son of man, same as you, but a child of God, same as you." There was a silence in the crowd. Jesus spoke louder still as he said, "I am the one for whom your master bathed you. Follow me if you seek knowledge, and eternal life."

Jesus stepped out of the water onto the opposite bank, committed fully now to his mission. Knowing many would not believe him, and knowing many more were conjuring up images of Daniel, and the apocalypse, and of holy clouds in their minds, he disappeared into the bush without looking back, without checking to see who would follow his trail. After a few moments, though, a rustling noise grew louder from behind him, and he knew that his fate had been set in motion. The shimmering tremor of the cosmos had finally settled, and the world had completed its cycle of change, just as the guru had explained it would.

Jesus felt the mark of oil upon his forehead, long since washed away, but still burning with fresh life. He told himself that in due time, the teachings of his guru would settle on his people, that in time, they would all come to see the world as he had been taught to.

But he was wrong.

Though many would learn to love, many would learn to heal the sins of the body, and many would learn to forgive the sins of the soul, countless others would try to cover the infinite nakedness, shroud the beauty of compassion, and dull the edge of truth's light. For the remainder of his days, Jesus would wear the disguise of a charismatic, hiding the serpent hands his master had gifted him, and only whispering the song of *Om Nashi Me* just loud enough for the breeze to hear. And forever he would be haunted by his guru's prophecy, the words of Isaiah squirming just beneath his flesh—*Speak so that they may not listen, teach so that they may not understand.*

END

Afterword

Where Stories Come From

At some point in the last year or two, I did something I rarely do—attended church. While I've always had an interest in religion, spirituality, mythology, and the occult, I have always (like most Catholic schoolchildren) hated going to church. I never quite outgrew the feeling of imprisonment in those hard-backed pews and the self-consciousness of a pre-pubescent child squeaking out the wrong notes to whatever stilted hymn he was supposed to be singing. As I grew older, I just couldn't shake the feeling that this weekly ritual was wholly artificial and one that, like most things, should only be endured for the purpose of fulfilling some occasional social obligations. I watched my nephew be baptized by a sniveling priest trying desperately not to look like a high school sophomore, and I'll be there if my little buddy chooses to be confirmed. I would go to mass on Christmas Eve with my Dad because he always had some special affinity for vigils. Likewise, I would darken the door of the Methodist Church to support him in his role as the Choir Director (and because he puts on a really good show) or on Mother's Day so Mom wouldn't feel utterly alone. In short, being in a house of worship is always a sort of sacrifice for me—something I do for those that I love and not in any way something I ever thought would give me some sort of personal satisfaction.

Well, it wasn't too long ago that I found myself sitting in church, this time a Baptist one, next to my wonderful girlfriend. She, like me, is more interested in the music than anything, but, unlike me, she actually enjoys other parts of the ritual as well. And while I was sitting there, counting the minutes until we could leave and have a nice lunch, I actually heard a sermon that spoke to me in some meaningful way. I'll spare the details, but the preacher discussed the story in Matthew of Jesus and the hemorrhaging girl in

such a way that made me actually consider the humanity of Jesus and the disciples. What I mean is, this sermon filled in some of the stylistic gaps that the gospels present and, in a sense, got me thinking about what the Bible would look like if someone rewrote it in the rhetoric appropriate for a contemporary audience.

So I left the church, fascinated with this idea of the *character* of Jesus and the gospels as a literary work instead of theological device. And, irreverent as it may sound, I kept asking myself what the gospels would look like if Jesus didn't have superpowers? And if he were a fully human and fallible character, who would care enough to narrate his story? These questions are what led me to write the first draft of what was then called *Thirty Years a Man*, the story of Jesus the human being, a literary retelling of a historical figure in a turbulent time.

Stripping Away Divinity

While there are many huge differences between the aims and goals of that first draft, a work that seems to belong in some distant past, and the novella in its current form, the fourth full draft, the ultimate thematic kernel has remained the same for the entirety of this project: Jesus is depicted as a first-century doctor instead of miracle-worker. Dr. Poland was instrumental in bringing this theme and its meaningfulness to the forefront of my work. In the summer of 2013, after reading the first draft, he focused in on one single line out of a 190 page manuscript. It was a short little scene where Jesus is healing someone with herbs and tools that he carried in his "satchel." He told me then and there that my story about a present-day prophet and an ancient-mariner kind of fallen angel discussing the real life of Jesus in a run-down Texas barroom paled in comparison to the story of Jesus as physician. And he was right.

So after cutting my manuscript in half, I focused in heavily on what I knew to be the core of the New Testament message—that of the healing mission of Christ. As I began to do some critical inquiry into the matter, I came to find out that I wasn't alone in this interpretation. Geza Vermes, renowned Biblical historian and scholar, discusses in his book *Jesus the Jew* the sheer percentage of text that focuses on Jesus's acts of healing and exorcisms. He states that, within the Synoptic Gospels, there are six accounts that deal directly with exorcisms and twelve separate healing narratives (Vermes 22-26). Other miracles attributed to Jesus, such as his mastery over storms, walking on water, and multiplication of food, are, according to Vermes, “numerically insignificant” (26).

In his list of healings, Vermes distinguishes between occurrences when Jesus healed through words alone and the times when Jesus healed through touch. Generally, the latter of these types of passages says something like “Jesus laid his hands upon him” or some other terse and cryptic phrase. Then, by what contemporary Christians might call divine accord, the person would be miraculously healed. Vermes comments on passages like this when he states that “the gospels cannot be expected to provide more than a skeletal outline of Jesus of Nazareth as he really was” (42). In my reading of these sections, my aim was to fill in the muscle tissue, so to speak. For the purpose of crafting a historically accurate, mortal protagonist, I had to investigate ways in which Jesus could actually perform these feats *without* the assistance of supernatural occurrences, magic, miracles etc. So I supplemented a character trait Jesus already had, compassion, with one that he would need to be a successful healer: specialized knowledge.

I will discuss my protagonist's specific medical education in a later section, but for now, I want to further comment on this idea of the full humanity of Jesus. In her book

The Gnostic Gospels, Elaine Pagels discusses how the early Christian church was formed in the midst of so many more spiritual texts than what contemporary Christians consider to be the authorized canon. Among these texts, some lost and some rejected as heretical, there are collections of what biblical scholars refer to as the Gnostic Gospels.

The term “gnostic” comes from the Greek word meaning “to know.” But, like many Greek words, this one has its own set of connotations. *Gnosis* was not necessarily related to empirical knowledge so much as it was *intuitive* knowledge. To achieve *gnosis* might be likened to achieving some sort of spiritual certainty, a heightened and more mystical connection with the mysterious forces of the universe. Therefore, accounts labeled under the blanket term “gnostic” are accounts written around the second century that describe the life or philosophies of Jesus in unconventional or radical ways. Among these is The Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Christ, many of which are quite similar to parables or statements made in the Synoptic Gospels¹. There are, however, many sayings in this collection which seem to directly contradict some central theological concepts in the New Testament, especially those found in The Gospel of John.

When I was composing the second draft of this thesis, I found myself enthralled with Pagels’s discussion of these differences in her book *Beyond Belief*. To paraphrase, Pagels describes how The Gospel of Thomas asserts that any man who is righteous enough, who performs enough good works, and who cleanses his heart of any malicious intent can ascend to some level of divinity as Christ did. The Gospel of John is, of course, directly opposed to this notion since in the first chapter it makes claims like “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God,” and later

¹ Mark, Matthew, and Luke

how this “word became flesh” in the form of Jesus, a man John identifies as the “one and only Son of God” (John 1:1-5). John introduces the idea of exclusivity by calling Jesus the “only begotten son” and by asserting that Jesus had the closest connection with the divine. This is a concept established in the early Christian church by way of Paul’s epistles and, later, by the outraged Bishop Irenaeus.

But why would the early Christian Church so vehemently reject the philosophy of spiritual promotion that The Gospel of Thomas advocates? Pagels clarifies this question by first reminding readers that in the second century, learned members of the early church read many conflicting texts, including John and Thomas, side by side. These scholars and spiritualists created a hybridized theology of acceptance and possibility. It wouldn’t be until Irenaeus so aggressively attacked any circulating Gnostic texts that the church would adopt the four-gospel tradition of the New Testament (Pagels 90). Pagels suggests that the reasoning behind this was a simple matter of hierarchical organization and control. Irenaeus, like many other early church fathers, knew that in order for the religion to grow and prosper, it had to be an organized and unified front with an almost militaristic chain of command to establish a sense of order.

This is the same reason why the Roman emperor Constantine chose the Catholic sect to unify the multiple early denominations of the Christian church. The Catholic sect was organized in a fashion that reminded Constantine of the Roman Army: the bishops served as commanders, the priests were protectors, and the deacons were centurions. Like our modern American military structure of General/ Colonel/ Lieutenant which is under direct control of the President as Commander and Chief (the emperor in the case of Rome), these church officers were headed up by a supreme leader in the form of Christ,

the highest spiritual authority. And, consistent with the military analogy, the bishops, priests and deacons held complete command over the parishioners as if they were enlisted infantrymen. The aforementioned authority was, according to dogma, granted by God and handed down through the system of established order. In short, by calling the Council of Nicaea in 325, Constantine created a Foucaultian power structure which, almost overnight, changed the early Christian movement from a group of men and women who tried to emulate the actions of Jesus and practiced spiritual rites of self-discovery, to a group of docile lambs, subservient only to the select few pious individuals who promised them salvation through faith alone.

The reason I'm presenting all of this material in such detail is because I believe this exclusivity principle of John, Paul, Iranaeus, and Constantine to be completely erroneous. Personally, I believe that a church founded around a man who overcame his own free will, tendencies toward evil, and emotional flaws only to ascend to the level of divine healer and spiritual role model is much more compelling than the idea that the Son of God always was and always will be divine despite the preordained incarnation of Jesus Christ. Essentially, the conflicting philosophies are similar to the differences between Buddhism and Calvinism. In the first, a person can strive to become better, holier, and closer to God. In the second, the doctrine of predestination insists that, no matter how hard you try, your fate is already sealed—salvation or damnation is out of your control.

The latter of the two narratives does nothing to encourage believers to aspire to any sort of salvation through compassion, piety, and good works because, unless they are predestined to be some holy and otherworldly entity, it would be impossible for them to truly be like Christ. The first of these two narratives, however, is one that I like to

compare to Christopher Nolan's depiction of Batman in the *Dark Knight Trilogy*. Bruce Wayne describes the Batman as a symbol in *The Dark Knight Rises*. When asked why he wears the mask, he explains that it creates an anonymity that reminds all of Gotham City that the man who risks his life for the sake of justice is just a nameless citizen, and that "a hero can be anyone." In this way, depicting Jesus as fully human and devoid of any paranormal attributes is my way of demonstrating that the compassionate and loving savior *could be any one of us*.

There is at least some basis for believing that the historical Jesus might have also been a proponent of this type of philosophy. In his discussion of the numerous titles placed on Jesus, Geza Vermes closely examines the often used and more often misunderstood "son of man" moniker. Vermes discusses that this phrase was not some cryptic remark invented by Jesus of Nazareth but, rather, it was long since employed in the speech of Galileans and has some roots in older rabbinical literature. There are a few conflicting usages, but Vermes explains that the phrase really only exists in a couple of contexts: the conversational circumlocution and the prophetic epithet.

In a later section, I will discuss the use of "son of man" as it relates to the eschatological, but for now I want to focus the reader's attention on the first of these uses since Vermes points out that Jesus used this iteration more often than any other. The important thing to realize here is that, as a circumlocution, the phrase "son of man" can take on two distinct meanings. The speaker can either be referring to mankind as a whole, a single everyman literary figure, or the speaker can be referring to himself in a very humble way. The implication then is that it is up to Jesus's audience to decide the meaning based on the context. Vermes describes how it was not an uncommon trope in

early rabbinical literature to employ this phrase as a rhetorical device, one designed to have audience members fill in both possible meanings and then consider their own role in the narrative (164). For this reason, I believe that, more often than not, Jesus as an orator was encouraging people to think of his parables and preaching as the chronicle of the everyman. Moreover, when Jesus makes statements like “the son of man has the right on earth to forgive sins,” he may not only be referring to himself, but to the human race (Vermes 180). And in this context, forgiveness of sins equates to the curing of disease. Immediately after this statement, Jesus forgives a paralytic of his sins and tells him to get up and walk, proving his point to the crowd (Matthew 9:5). Thus, what was once believed to be a statement of authority now transforms itself into a call to action.

When discussing this idea of the humanity of Jesus and how the historical figure would have approached the subject, it is absolutely imperative that another Christological title is critically examined: that of “son of God.” Once again, Vermes sheds light on this often-discussed phrase by tracing its development from ancient rabbinical texts to its most recognizable form in the Nicene Creed. Contrary to popular belief, the phrase “son of God,” at least in Jesus’s time in Galilee, did not mean “divine incarnation.” Nor did the title suggest something like a demigod figure; this mythos belongs to a Hellenistic world and applies to characters like Heracles or Achilles. Nor did it carry any of the Jesus as Superman connotations present in the 2014 epic-action-blockbuster *Son of God* directed by Christopher Spencer—a film that, in my opinion, aims to present Jesus of Nazareth in a role completely opposite that of my protagonist.

No, “son of God” in its primary usage for a Jewish audience of the first century would be in reference to some supernatural or angelic being like the Nephilim described

in the apocryphal Book of Enoch (Prophet 106). The other primary meaning of “son of god” would only be used in connection to royalty, as it was in reference to King David or Solomon. The tradition was that the Messiah would come to Israel in a position of regal authority, hence the often employed combination phrase “Messiah, son of God.” Vermes states, however, that once the human nature of the person referred to was revealed, and the person held no such royal authority, the Jewish audience would take the phrase “son of God” to simply mean a righteous or just man (200). Vermes cites passages from Ecclesiastes 4 and Deuteronomy 14 that suggest that Israelites who fulfill social obligations, perform good works, and remain faithful will be called sons of God (195-97). The most righteous and exalted of these men might also be endowed with some sort of supernatural powers and, therefore, depending on context, “son of god” can also be employed to mean “miracle worker.”

But the main question here is how the historical Jesus of Nazareth would employ this term. Put simply, he wouldn't. Vermes lists only twice in the gospels where Jesus referred to himself as “son of God” and both of these (Mark 13 and Matthew 11) are ruled to be inauthentic, later accretions. Not only are the remarks attributed to Jesus in these passages inconsistent with his other teachings (especially in Matthew when Jesus describes a divine exclusivity and hierarchical ranking system descending from God), but they are also terribly similar to later church doctrines put forth by John, Paul, and the Council at Nicaea and, thus, anachronistic.

But the title “son of God” appears many other times in the gospels when it is spoken by other characters. In the majority of these instances, the phrase is uttered by a demon during an exorcism. In this context, since Jesus is performing some divine work,

the demon is employing the title to mean “miracle worker.” Similarly, the phrase is used by men, usually in ridicule during the crucifixion. But the important thing to remember is that Jesus never used the title to identify himself. And when questioned by Peter whether or not he was the Messiah, Jesus denied this label and, simultaneously, the title “son of God.”

There is one final issue to consider when discussing this title, however, and that is Jesus’s constant and idiosyncratic invocation of God as “the Father.” Vermes explains that while using the Aramaic term “Abba” to identify God as a father was a tell-tale characteristic of Jesus’s oration, it wasn’t unique in Jewish tradition. Honi the Circle-Drawer, a near-contemporary of Jesus and a minor character in earlier drafts of my thesis, has a famous prayer preserved in the Mishnah which identifies the speaker as “son of the house.” In this sense, rabbinical scholars interpret the meaning as an expression of intimacy with God as a father figure. Honi also utilized the word “Abba” to refer to spiritual leaders on Earth and the Father in Heaven. His statement is comparable to Christ’s more familiar proclamation in Matthew 23, “Call no man your father on Earth, for you have one Father, who is in Heaven” (Vermes 211). In this sense, both speakers are advocating a close and personal relationship with God, while at the same time cautioning against bestowing gratuitous praise on any mortal. In an extreme sense, this is the same reason why the guru in my novella has given up his birth name: “All titles and honors belong to the LORD” (55). This approach is very much consistent with Jesus’s constant message of deflection when in the gospels he instructs his followers to praise not him, but the Holy Father.

The reason I'm discussing these titles in such detail is to reiterate the fact that Jesus, above all else, was a humble charismatic. Not only is his often employed "son of man" title a modest circumlocution or allegorical device, but the title "son of God" was not something Jesus promoted or circulated. And while Vermes admits the likelihood that the title was in use during Jesus's lifetime, he also states that its context would have only been that of "righteous man" or "miracle worker." As Ferdinand Hahn describes, the evolution of the phrase "son of God" likely happened in three stages (Vermes 211). First, the term took on new meaning in the post-Easter period of The Church. At this point, disciples saw that Jesus's ministry had come to an end and believed him to be a fitting Messiah adopted by God and enthroned in Heaven. During this time period, many believed in a spiritual resurrection instead of a literal physical one, so this idea was a fitting end to a miraculous career. The second stage in the development of the "son of God" title introduced the concept of the virgin birth, therefore admitting direct divine intervention and leaning more towards the Hellenistic concept of demigod. The final stage was popularized by John's theology discussed above, that is, the concept of pre-existence within the divine. Eventually this led later Hellenistic gentile converts to believe in Jesus as equivalent with God, thus spawning the theology so familiar in the contemporary Church of the equal trinity collected in the unified Godhead.

Naturally, this third stage of the term would be inconceivable to a first-century Palestinian audience. The rigorous insistence on monotheism had long since pervaded the Jewish community and so the acceptance of a man as also being the divine would be ludicrous and unfathomable. Therefore, any expression of kinship by both Jesus in the gospels and Jesus as my protagonist hinges upon the concept of a deep personal

relationship and humility. This phrasing was, of course, terribly important to consider when constructing a completely human character for Jesus of Nazareth, so I had to come up with a way to introduce it correctly. This is why the first major event Jesus remembers in his string of hallucinations is the death and funeral proceedings of his real father, Joseph. It is this event which pushes Jesus to the edge of sanity and causes him enough pain to run away from his home. The weight of this grief and loneliness is also what causes Jesus to first refer to God by the title “Father” in the sort of precursor to the Lord’s Prayer. From this point on in the narrative, Jesus struggles not only with the physical loss of a father, but the process of developing enough emotional maturity to be satisfied with just the heavenly Father.

After his many years and trials with the guru, Jesus finally does grow spiritually and emotionally to the point where he can cross back over the River Jordan, announcing himself as the “son of man, same as you, but a child of God, same as you” (125). To me, this statement was the best way to emphasize the foundational tenets of Jesus’s ministry. The statement suggests that he is the “son of man,” or, an everyman, a common man, just like all of those to whom he is speaking. But he complicates it by then saying that he is also a “child of God, same as you,” which, to me, implies that every member of the crowd has the potential to rise to the sort of righteousness and maturity and spiritual enlightenment which Jesus has. Once again, Jesus returns to preach humility and acceptance, and to teach people to grow beyond what they thought possible. Before his guru agrees to train him, the master healer asks why Jesus wants to return to Palestine and fulfill the role of “savior.” Finally, Jesus responds with the answer that “Maybe I can

help them learn to save themselves” (60). In other words, maybe Jesus can show us all the way to truly ascend to his level of consciousness, faith, happiness, and compassion.

While this kind of heresy would have certainly led to my execution in the 2nd and 3rd century, and while, admittedly, it may not have been the most practical ideology with which to organize a developing religion, I truly believe that at this point in the development of Christianity that it is time for practitioners to once again look inward for their spiritual truths instead of upward. In the text of *The Servant's Satchel*, I address this through the philosophy of the guru as he instructs Jesus that “we are all capable of great things if we find the strength to show compassion” (92). I want readers to realize, above all else, that this novella is not a story about Jesus, but a story about a man learning to become something greater than himself. And while compassion is certainly integral to Jesus’s development, specialized knowledge is what makes this character a unique interpretation of the New Testament figure.

Medical Knowledge and Research

In *Thirty Years a Man*, the most medically advanced procedure I had Jesus undergo was the cataract surgery which has persisted to this final draft. But in those early pages, Jesus’s unprofessional performance might have earned him the title of first-century quack. As best I can remember, the only thing I explained about the surgery was that Jesus knew he could use a “knife” to scrape away some filth from the patient’s eyes. Obviously, that scene, along with the leper surgery and all the other healing accounts, has undergone some serious revision in light of ancient medical research.

The first step in this process was to take accounts from the Synoptic Gospels, like when Jesus heals a leper in Matthew 8 by touching him or when Jesus heals a blind man

in Mark 8 by spitting² in his eyes and then laying hands upon him, and to figure out how a historical old-world healer would have managed these feats. Again, it is my interpretation that the gospels all suffer from severe lack of details, so my narrative exists to fill in these gaps. By researching leprosy and blindness cures in the first century, I came upon quite a bit of scholarly information on ancient medicine.

While I won't try to reprint everything on the subject that I read, I would like to share some of the more interesting accounts. First, a cursory Google search will yield all sorts of journal articles related to ancient cranial surgery. An article hosted on sciencedaily.com which reprints a story originally written by Andrea Estrada of The University of California Santa Barbara discusses how Peruvian healers performed trepanation surgeries over a thousand years ago. Trepanation is the process of removing sections of the skull to alleviate pressure in the brain brought on by swelling (Estrada). What's more, doctors of a millennium past were using simple hand tools to accomplish this medical miracle. Archaeologists can determine from retrieved skulls whether or not the patient survived the surgery because, in many successful cases, the bone would partially regenerate as a thinner patch of skeletal tissue over time. And, as if that weren't amazing enough, the Peruvians weren't even close to being the first to successfully perform trepanation operations. Scholars agree that this procedure was common in Ancient Greece, the Ancient Near East, and parts of Africa as early as the Mesolithic period—nearly 12,000 years ago (Missios 11).

After reading things like this, I became fascinated with the body of medical knowledge that could have possibly been preserved in the Middle East of Jesus's day. Of course, it wouldn't all be readily available, and anyone seeking such knowledge would

² In the ancient world, saliva was thought to have healing properties.

have to travel far and wide to encounter highly trained individuals willing to part with such valuable information. Enter the guru. From the first draft of this thesis, I knew right away that Jesus could not become the character he needed to be without engaging with as many different cultures as might feasibly be available to him. So in the early pages, the reader watched as Jesus encountered many would-be prophets and holy men, all of them having some valuable skill that they could teach him. Finally, as he walked further and further east, he encountered the nameless guru who, instead of saving his life, provided him some much-needed shelter from an annoying angel named Samael. I will discuss Samael's shifting roles throughout the revision process later on, but for now, I want to stay focused on encountering the guru.

In that early draft, the guru served merely as the source of many of Jesus's more famous teachings, like those of the Sermon on the Mount and the notion of turning the other cheek. In my reading of the gospels, I identified these as particularly Eastern ways of thinking. In my mind, it seemed fully possible that the historical Jesus might have, at some point in the thirty years before his ministry began, encountered a Buddhist or Hindu teacher that could have inspired some of what a Jewish audience would call his more radical philosophies. And, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I would not have been alone in this opinion regarding what was commonly known as the "lost years" of Jesus's life. Louis Jacolliot, Nicolas Notovich, and Levi H. Dowling were three among many scholars who believed in some connection between Jesus and ancient India. They were all very quickly debunked and, in some ways, derided, but their theories still persist in small circles despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence or ancient manuscript to

support the claim. But the wonderful thing about fiction writing is that, sometimes, all you need is the *possibility* of truth.

Anyway, while the guru was first just a flat archetypal character, a sort of “mystical negro” no different than *The Green Mile*’s John Coffee or Will Smith’s portrayal of Bagger Vance, he quickly led me to do some extensive research into the kinds of healing available in ancient India. Once I discovered the existence of Ayurvedic medicine and ancient surgical texts like the Sushruta Samhita, the guru quickly changed into a more rounded character no longer dependent simply upon koan-style axioms or inexplicable occurrences. In short, through the revision of the second draft and incorporation of serious research, the guru morphed from an exoticized other to a real product of a real culture.

For instance, Ayurvedic medicine, the holistic Indian equivalent to Ancient Chinese Medicine, provides the guru and, consequently, Jesus, with a long-standing foundational knowledge of herbalism. It is the Ayurvedic tradition as preserved in contemporary herbalist encyclopedias that provides my thesis with nearly all of the botanical treatments employed. For instance, the reason the guru fumigates the operating space with a censer of white mustard, star anise, and white cedar is because of a rudimentary understanding of infection. These three ingredients all have antibacterial properties as well as tendencies to relieve congestion (hence their use for the patient with the violent cough), and while the guru would not have any knowledge of germ theory, he and Jesus would both be well-acquainted with the idea of contagion.

In ancient Palestine and other places in the Middle East, Hansen’s Disease, more commonly known as leprosy, was truly a scourge upon the land, and one of the main

reasons that ancient civilizations understood this concept. Jesus would know from his Jewish upbringing that lepers were spiritually and physically unclean and that to touch one would result in spiritual and physical corruption. The guru, having more direct experience with the matter, would likely know that most “lepers” were actually only suffering from mild skin conditions like eczema, acne, blemishes, boils, or other such innocuous dermatological afflictions. In most cases, very few patients actually had what we now know to be Hansen’s Disease, but because of the rampant fear and ignorance of the sickness, temple priests more often than not erred on the side of caution by declaring almost any skin condition as leprosy.

What this meant for educated healers is that there would be a lot of easily treatable patients and many others whose condition would be deeply integrated into their cellular structure. Of course, these healers would have no way of knowing which was which, so they would have to assume that every patient needed external as well as internal treatment. This is why the guru and Jesus first employ fumigation to reduce the risk of infection and sterilize the cave, then move on to scarification of the epidermis and application of irritant herbs like Hellebore, and finally coat the lanced areas with a soothing poultice of aloe and restorative herbs like the *thuja occidentalis*, or tree of life. The final step for an experienced Ayurveda would be to administer a healing agent like chaulmoogra oil intravenously. But, for the sake of narrative impact, the guru utilizes the venom of the desert-horned viper that he harvested earlier in the story to augment an acupuncture treatment. This use of toxins, of course, was not unheard of in the ancient world. Venom from various snakes, bees, scorpions, and other poisonous creatures were consistently used to combat infection or neurological disorders. Also, as a matter of plot,

this action reinforces the guru's sentiment of love between all living things and his axiom of "nothing [being] poisonous but the dosage" (59). The latter of these two sentiments I hoped would be a resounding thematic idea when Jesus made his ultimate decision to re-enter Galilee under the guise of a charismatic. That is to say, Jesus's decision to embrace this façade for the sake of gaining close access to his people is an acceptable one, so long as he doesn't carry the act too far and lose himself in the grandeur of celebrity, thus poisoning and killing his goal to have the people learn to save themselves.

While shots of venom, mud poultices, and herbal potions are all interesting and integral to Jesus's medical education, it's his experience with surgery that truly makes him a first century miracle worker. The Ayurvedic tradition contains two main foundational texts that have been preserved: the Charaka Samhita, which discusses basic anatomy, pathology, herbalism, and faith-based rituals, and the Sushruta Samhita. While I utilized secondary sources³ to accrue a basic understanding of the first text, I actually read portions of the Sushruta Samhita when researching surgical practices of the first century.

The interesting thing about this text though is that it's not a first-century manuscript. This medical manual dates back to the time of the surgeon Sushruta who lived around 600 BCE. That's six hundred years *before* the birth of Jesus. And this text details a great deal more procedures than just some prehistoric trepanation attempts. The Sushruta Samhita is the first extant medical text to describe the process of rhinoplasty and, as far as I know, one of the oldest texts detailing the foundational principles for modern plastic surgery. This text also employed the use of complicated medical

³ One of which, anniesremedy.com, is a wonderful online herbalism encyclopedia that gives history, folklore, usages, and academic citations for almost every plant, herb, root, seed, or fungus conceivable.

instruments like endoscopes and catheters while the majority of the rest of the world was floundering in an obliviousness of curative understanding. Keep in mind that the great names of ancient Greek medicine like Hippocrates and Galen wouldn't develop their theories until 300 and 800 years, respectively, after Sushruta. But since Ayurvedic medicine, as well as many Greco-Roman advancements, preceded Jesus, I took the liberty of combining many sources to create a wide body of information for Jesus to learn from the guru.

For instance, the Sushruta Samhita describes the proper use of many medical instruments like scalpels, hooks, and probes, but it wouldn't be until the Greeks mastered bronze working that these instruments would be available in the form which the guru and Jesus employ. This is a fact that the guru, perhaps too obtrusively, discusses with Jesus in the scene with the butchered boar (71). And while these tools come into play very significantly in each healing narrative, the rectal speculum for hemorrhoids, the hooked needles and "snot-straw" for cataracts, the scalpel for Eli the leper, are just instruments. As the guru (and later Jesus) explains, "these things are tools, but they are not how I have healed you" (33). He is, of course, simultaneously referring to knowledge and faith, as would be the tradition for first century healers. But at this point in the narrative, the reader is unfamiliar with the rigor of training that constitutes the process of achieving such knowledge and faith.

The Sushruta Samhita was my ultimate guide for how to train Jesus in these matters because it describes in minute detail how an apprentice should be educated. Jesus's use of forceps to pick up seeds, his use of the scalpel and hook on vegetable fibers, and the practice of probing and scarring inanimate objects were a huge first step in

having novice surgeons develop dexterity and a familiarity with their equipment. Once the student learns to use the tools correctly, he is ready to practice on a cadaver, a process central to Ayurvedic education. Of course, this provided some serious conflict for Jesus and the guru because it was a major violation of Jesus's religious upbringing. While the Galilean approach to religion and ritual was lax at times, there were certain Mosaic laws that every Jew knew not to break, and handling corpses was one of these. But, as Geza Vermes notes about the Jesus in the gospels when discussing his nonchalance in "ritually defiling himself...No one can be a healer and preserve himself from sickness and death, or an exorcist and be afraid of the devil" (26). This discussion leads to many arguments and accusations in the gospels regarding Jesus's possible affiliation with the Devil, a very serious charge. For the purpose of my narrative, I wanted to depict the point in his life when Jesus bridged the gap between fundamental Judaism and empirically-gained homoeopathic knowledge.

Once a student was exposed to this level of anatomical and surgical instruction, it would only be the next logical step for him to undergo supervised clinical operations. Despite its focus on the subject, the Sushruta Samhita described surgery as last resort. At one point the guru spouts one of the many sayings attributed to the historical Sushruta which reiterates this philosophy: "surgery is mutilation, not doctoring" (97). But after all other Ayurvedic possibilities had been exhausted, the ancient Indian doctors would not hesitate to take on procedures like hemorrhoid treatment or cataract removal in the exact same way as it is described in this narrative—right down to the detail about the audible sound a punctured lens makes.

Quoting once again from Sushruta, the guru explains to Jesus that “theory without practice is like a one-winged bird—incapable of flight” (98). This maxim not only explains why Jesus needs to repetitively scrape away at deadwood and vegetables, and why he needs to practice surgical techniques that he may be uncomfortable with, but it describes a more thematic concern for my protagonist. In a sort of double-meaning, the guru is reminding Jesus that he has a lot of growing to do before he can soar to great heights. Not only does a fully human Jesus need to empirically learn healing methods and advanced medicine, but he needs to overcome emotional insecurities, spiritual stumbling blocks, and issues of psychological maturity before he can ever hope to lead a group of his countrymen to any sort of salvation.

A “Where’s Waldo?” Approach to Academics

In this section I would like to address why, exactly, *The Servant’s Satchel* is a fitting capstone to my graduate academic career. Through a few examples of characterization, elements of plot, and thematic content, I aim to demonstrate how a creative thesis in the form of a novella can accurately showcase the body of knowledge I have retained during my time at Radford.

My first year at Radford was the first time in my career as an English major that I had ever taken a course in Literary Theory. Thanks to the hard work, energy, and enthusiasm of Dr. Moira Baker, I jammed my brain full of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and other crypto-poetic theorists and eventually amassed enough of an understanding to craft a conference paper that I presented at the American Men’s Studies Conference in the Spring of 2013. While it might seem like a stretch, the research I did in the areas of gender studies and masculine identity invention played a large role in my development of

Jesus's emotional character, especially with regard to his strange bursts of anger and Freudian need to heal his father. And, as previously mentioned, it was Foucault's ideas about power structures that led to my thesis of the Catholic Church as a "regulatory regime" wherein the early Church fathers leveraged eternal salvation and the exclusive divinity of Christ against the unquestioning obedience of early followers.

In my next semester I continued to study theory with a particular emphasis on Mythological Criticism and Jungian Archetypes. The Jungian approach is a branch of psychological literary criticism which asserts the existence of the *collective unconscious*, a shared, primeval, and ancestral memory (Dobie 62). Because all humans have the ability to tap into this shared body of knowledge, individuals are capable of recognizing different character archetypes like the hero, the scapegoat, or the temptress (Dobie 64-65). This research was instrumental in my conceptualizing of certain characters as they related to other narrative contexts. For instance, around this time in the process, I saw myself as reinventing Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* but for a contemporary Christian audience. That is, I saw in Hesse's protagonist the same archetypal heroic qualities that I wanted my depiction of Jesus to showcase: humanity, thirst for hidden truth, and ultimate quasi-mystical discovery. This Jungian approach also led me to consider the mythologies that a historical Jesus would be familiar with, thus allowing me to color his perspective of the world around him.

For instance, in the final version of *The Servant's Satchel*, as Jesus returns to Galilee, he begins to emulate the rhetoric of John the Baptist by saying the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (124). He also deliberately uses the phrase "son of man" to describe himself. I discussed already the rhetorical advantages of this statement: the

ability to reference himself and an everyman character simultaneously. But in this instance, Jesus is also allowing his audience to consider the phrase as it appears in the Book of Daniel. In chapter 7:13, Daniel states “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was *one like a son of man*, coming with the clouds of heaven” (emphasis mine). This phrase implies that the figure Daniel sees *appears to be* human (because of the word “like”) and that he is still somehow divinely inspired because of his descent from a cloud. Jesus knows that his use of the phrase might add to his mystique and thus encourage people to follow the hope of a delivered Messiah.

Another nod to the Old Testament mythology is when Jesus has a hallucination brought on by the guru’s use of the “bitter lettuce” (*Lactuca virosa*) in a special tea. The guru later explains this hallucination to be the dream of a prophet. He is then not surprised to see that Jesus has already figured this out. The reason for this is because the imagery in the dream sequence is an amalgamation of two very popular prophetic visions: the first comes from Ezekiel 8 (supplemented with other minor prophets’ dream imagery) and the second from Isaiah 6. The latter of these two prophecies is especially important thematically because it is within Isaiah that the final words of my novella originate: “speak so that they may not listen, teach so that they may not understand” (126). In the context of the scriptures, God instructs Isaiah in this way to remind him that the people of Israel must blunder and sin until the nation is utterly laid waste. Only then will the “holy seed” be like a stump in the land when the oak of the civilization has been cut down. In this way, the guru is reminding Jesus that he may be embarking on a journey that will not lead to fruition in his own lifetime. And for Jesus to consider these words at

the end of the narrative means that he has grown to the point where he is mature enough to teach a world that is not yet ready to understand.

Further influence for my thesis came from Dr. Poland's Modern Native American Writers course. In this class, we discussed authors like Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, and Thomas King who all wrote with a postcolonial view of the American Indian. Once again, Jung's theory of archetypes came into play here when we discussed figures like "the trickster" in Native mythologies. Essentially, the trickster is a character who disavows social norms and causes tension/turbulence/strife for the purpose of "stirring the waters" and elucidating certain cultural fallacies or injustices. The trickster is, by far, one of the most difficult types of characters to construct as an American writer, because my personal cultural background doesn't afford many genuine examples of this archetype—with the possible exception of Rafiki in *The Lion King*, but that is, on at least two levels, a cartoon representation⁴. But as I began constructing the character of the guru, I wanted desperately to avoid the trope I mentioned earlier of the "exotic other." I wanted to create a character that was more than just a vehicle for new philosophies, funny clothes, and archaic rituals.

I like to think that there are certain scenes where the guru does accomplish this. When the master healer offers Jesus the bone pipe packed with a mysterious, perception-altering dried herb, he is not only encouraging the student to try new things, but he is actually helping him experience the world differently, if only momentarily (56). The same is true for the scene I described earlier with the bitter lettuce tea. But the guru can

⁴ While I am no expert in the field, the soon to be Dr. Alana Baker has informed me that this notion is what's known as an autoethnographic response—part of rhetorical listening, a concept explored by Krista Radcliffe, a modern scholar of rhetoric. This theory suggests that in order to understand and make meaning, one must consider his or her cultural/social background.

also be rather obnoxious in his lessons. Being that he is an expatriate Jew himself, the guru knows full well what he is doing when he throws the pig bladder to Jesus (68). He knows that Jesus is not supposed to come into contact with any internal organs of *teref*, that is, non-kosher or unclean animals, but he tosses the bladder anyway. From the standpoint of the trickster, this would be for the purpose of forcing a realization upon Jesus. Even though he touched the unclean animal part and even though he watched and smelled as his master roasted the rest of the boar, Jesus did not incur any sort of heavenly consequences. Another of these sorts of object lessons is when the guru holds Jesus underwater until he nearly drowns (103). This time, the guru as trickster is much more violent when proving his point to iterate the severity of the lesson. In essence, he demonstrates to Jesus that a surgeon who refuses to study anatomy with a cadaver is as useless as a drowned man.

Dr. Poland's Native Literature course was also instrumental in my conceptualization of Jesus's character. As a class we read many texts like *Ceremony*, *Tracks*, and *Fool's Crow*, that all had similar iterations of medicine men. Basically, these characters all had a few major traits in common: they had a vast knowledge of the stories of the past, successful ones like Betonie in *Ceremony* learned to blend this historical wisdom with modern techniques to create "new" medicine, and they all had a lucid understanding of how faith and science overlapped to produce healing. For this reason, I modeled Jesus's character in the second draft after this sort of tradition. Affectionately, and with some humor, I titled that draft *Jesus Christ, Medicine Man*. This work featured Jesus in the narrative framework of his Galilean mission, followed him to a climax in the Garden of Gethsemane, and ended with a figurative resurrection instead of a physical

escape from the tomb. And while Dr. Poland is right that the title is anachronistic, silly, and distracting, I still consider it to be the true title of my work. I know that, at least in this final draft, the satchel is a crucial thematic symbol, but I also know that I smile delightfully at the image my brain conjures at the sound of *Jesus Christ, Medicine Man*.

One final aspect of the Native class which clearly resounds in *The Servant's Satchel* is the concept of spatial time as opposed to linear or chronological time. This is another instance of culture shock for Jesus when he first meets the guru because the Jewish tradition is one of an apocalyptic nature. By this I mean that Jesus, like most of my audience, grew up in a world with a distinct concept of beginning and ending, a world where there was a specific creation event and where there will eventually be some form of Armageddon, spiritual or otherwise. The guru, however, attempts to explain the world in terms of circularity. When he crushes the stone on the hilltop and explains to Jesus the constant restructuring of the universe, the guru is basing this theory in a timeline with no limits (56). His theory that the stone will be repurposed and never truly destroyed can only be fully understood if Jesus accepts that he exists in a *place* in time instead of at a *point*. The difference is that a *place* in time will always exist, constantly reforming itself for infinity, and if one were immortal he could sit there in the same place forever to witness its continual shifting nature. A *point* in time implies a linear structure, one in which the present doesn't truly exist in human consciousness because by the time we can vocalize the thought, the moment belongs to the past. Essentially, in the first model, we are constantly changing, in the second model, we are constantly dying. Ultimately, Jesus struggles with this concept because it is so completely foreign to him, but eventually, like

Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, he comes to perceive the stone as a budding flower, a falling raindrop, and Joseph's warm embrace simultaneously (54, 122).

Perhaps one of the most influential courses in my graduate career was my study of Walt Whitman and subsequent modern American writers inspired by *Leaves of Grass*. Again, Dr. Poland was central to my understanding of this material, and because of his passion for the subject, much of Whitman's philosophy entered into this thesis. The principle of rebirth and shared substance not only appears in Eastern or Native American philosophies, it shines in the foreground of Whitman's *Song of Myself*: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (188). The Law of Conservation of Mass is so central to my thesis of having a human Jesus—literally and scientifically composed of the same atoms that have constituted and will continue to constitute countless other entities—that I chose to use a similar Whitman quote as the opening inscription for *The Servant's Satchel* (vii). While the opening of *Song of Myself* speaks to a very real idea that we are all literally made of the same stuff, the quote I chose as my inscription speaks more to what's known as the *absorptive self* in Whitman's poetry. Essentially this means that Whitman identified himself as a member of long non-hierarchical lists of other American figures including, but not limited to, "the opium-eater," "the prostitute," and "the president" (202). In this way, he saw himself as equal to all others and capable of loving all others. Similarly, Jesus must learn this kind of complete compassion in order to be a successful healer. At one point, the guru tries to illustrate this by instructing Jesus to pretend that he is operating on his own mother (73). Healing, according to the guru, "can only happen when you stand close enough to see your reflection in their eyes" (47).

One of the most emotional scenes for me in the entire novella is when Jesus first speaks with the guru when he wakes up in the strange tent. Jesus is in a great deal of pain, both physically and emotionally, and starts to describe how he has been searching for a long time for some form of truth, some way to make sense of the world. And then he says that after all his journeys and encounters, he couldn't find a single spiritualist, prophet, or holy man who could *fix* him. Then, the guru, in a very hurt and innocent way, asks quite simply, "Who told you that you were broken?" (30). To me, the reason that the guru is so hurt by this idea is because he has been living for so long with a Whitmanic understanding of acceptance. That is, like Whitman, the guru appreciates the world for the experience that it yields: he doesn't lament what the world is not, or what it could be. And eventually, Jesus comes to realize this and adapts it towards his philosophy of turning the other cheek.

Finally, last semester I had my first graduate level creative writing course with Dr. Don Secreast. While the class was more of a workshop than an instructional sort of lecture, I can identify at least one philosophical point that is heavily integrated into this work. Throughout the course of the semester, Dr. Secreast explained to us his theory that whenever a new technology is invented, that invention drastically, immediately, and forever transforms the world. For instance, the invention of the telephone not only changed people's conception of time, efficiency, and what it means to communicate, but it physically changed the landscape of the countryside. With telephones come wires and

large poles that dictate, in part, how roads are built and how houses are built and how people navigate the world. In a very real sense, one invention changes reality⁵.

Throughout *The Servant's Satchel*, there is repeated reference to the world as being on the brink of some change. The guru first tells Jesus that “everyone with any sense can feel that the ground beneath their feet is trembling, shifting into something new.” (47). Jesus recalls this conversation of a “turbulent metamorphosis” later in the text just before he has his prophetic dream describing the death of John the Baptist (119). And finally, as Jesus crosses through the waters of the River Jordan, without looking back to see who among the crowd might be following him, he realizes that “the shimmering tremor of the cosmos had finally settled, and the world had completed its cycle of change, just as the guru had explained it would” (125). *The Servant's Satchel* is ultimately about a man who discovers the power, compassion, and knowledge to reinvent himself, the ability to ascend to some higher plane of existence, and the Light⁶ of divinity within his own heart. In this sense, Jesus is, himself, the new and radical technology, and upon his re-invention, the world is forever changed.

A Brief and Final Note on Craft

While Dr. Secreast's class contributed a lot to this novella and while, based on the comments he wrote on my fiction for that class, I could probably assume that he would agree with some of the tenets I'm going to list here, I'll attribute these remarks on craft to

⁵It was brought to my attention by the brilliant doctoral candidate Alana Baker that this concept is known as Technological Determinism, a term believed to have been coined by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen and popularized by Karl Marx.

⁶Light is capitalized here to refer to the first item created in the Genesis account, not the visible spectrum of electromagnetic waves. Elaine Pagels describes how Light was created before the sun or other stars and, therefore, refers to some wellspring of divine energy. For more information on how this impacts our understanding of The New Testament, refer to her book *Beyond Belief*.

secondary sources and other writers. The simple reason for this is I don't like to put words in someone else's mouth unless they're one of my characters.

Point of View

One of the first questions I usually ask myself when starting a work of fiction is to whom the story will be told. I can trace this obsession with audience back to my eighth grade English teacher who had us all try to figure out who the narrator was talking to in "The Tell-Tale Heart." I don't know why, but I had never thought of fiction this way. Until this point, every story was being told to *me*, the reader. But this exercise really stuck with me when I started writing my own stories because I found comfort in first-person narrators who were delivering the plot to an audience that was also a character in the story. It was only natural then for my first draft of *Thirty Years a Man* to appear in this format: the narrator was the angel Samael, and the audience was the protagonist in a frame story, Martin. In this way I had the story set in present day Texas, but told by a narrator who could give a first person account of the life of Jesus. I thought I had avoided all the possible pitfalls of historical fiction (silly-sounding dialogue, anachronisms, two-dimensional settings) and still managed a level of authority for the narrative voice.

But as can be clearly seen, *The Servant's Satchel* has no such character to narrate. And this means that there is no characterized audience either. Naturally, Dr. Poland's suggestion to write the second draft in a third person limited point of view was at once scary and frustrating. Not only did I have to step outside of my comfort zone, but I had to all but abandon the foul-mouthed, sassy, and down-right irreverent character of Samael whom I had grown to love.

But I didn't give him up, not entirely. Mythologically speaking, Samael is a seraph of the God of Israel, an angel of the highest choir whose true form is a six-winged, fire-breathing, flying serpent. His most common epithet is the "poison and balm of God" because of his responsibility to tempt men to discover their righteousness or wickedness⁷. Originally, Samael was doing just this to my Jesus protagonist, ultimately tricking him to believe in himself as the Messiah, a belief which led to his brutal execution. After carrying out these orders and essentially killing the purest human he had ever come into contact with, Samael defected from the Heavenly Host and was punished by God to forever walk the earth as a mortal, living and dying over and over again.

In the final version of the text, Samael is nothing but a looming presence. The guru talks about him as a way to describe to Jesus the changing nature of the world and his ultimate choice in his own destiny (59). Twice more in the narrative, angels are loosely referenced as Mathias's father and Eli the leper are healed (97, 115). These accounts reinforce the idea that Jesus is being monitored in a sort of way and that his deeds really do presuppose a major world event. Finally, Jesus contemplates Samael's role in his life after the guru nearly drowns him in the river (105). In this passage, there are questions in italics which could be read as Jesus's own thoughts, some sort of auditory hallucinations, or the actual spoken questions of the angel Samael. At any rate, the sentiment is the same, Jesus is at a serious juncture in his training and he must decide once and for all who it is he wants to become.

Imagery

⁷ Because of this responsibility of tempting mortals, ancient Jewish sources often refer to Samael as "the adversary." This character would later be misappropriated as the Christian figure of Satan.

One thing I'd like to briefly point out is how difficult it is to write a novella in a time period so far removed from my own. Of course I couldn't have Jesus drive a car, phone a friend, or play Xbox when he got bored in the desert, but there were other constant minor details that led me to research the etymology of a word or origin of an object. For instance, with regards to poetic imagery, I had to be careful using words like "electric" to describe something. The only way that a first-century Jew could relate to a word like that would be through lightning, a feature of the natural world, and even then I doubt that any sort of similar understanding would arise.

So I realized pretty quickly that I could only use descriptors and props that were available to first-century Palestine. This was an incredibly difficult process for me because I'm a product of the internet age: when I think of speed I see bullets and airplanes, when I think of strength I imagine tanks or dinosaurs, and when I think of beauty I see neon lights, balloons, and a whole world of art that didn't exist for Jesus. Not to mention, there were plenty of times when I didn't even realize I was violating the timeline. Suddenly, the guru can't wear moccasins because the Anishinaabe people hadn't invented the word yet, and Jesus could no longer practice with his surgical tools on potatoes and tomatoes because these crops wouldn't even exist in that part of the world for hundreds of years.

The other problem that I encountered was this: when employing imagery that would be familiar to my protagonist, I risked alienating my contemporary reader! The one example of this that I can foresee is worth explaining is when the guru, and later Jesus, is described as having serpent arms. This is not a reference to the Christianized Garden of Eden story and the serpent character that has been unfairly transformed into

Satan to fit a changing ideology. This story would not have been a part of Jesus's upbringing or religious education, not in its present form anyway. Instead, Jesus, like many other ancient people, would equate the snake with healing and knowledge. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks especially held this belief and viewed snakes as having knowledge of two worlds since they seem to die and then dig themselves out of the grave after every winter. This association with new life is why the snake is wrapped around the caduceus, the ancient Greek symbol of healing and the modern symbol of medicine.

But Jesus would be familiar with what is now a much more obscure story featuring snakes. In the Old Testament, as Moses is leading the ancient Israelites through the desert, many of them begin violating God's laws. In this particular instance, God punishes the Israelites by sending down *nehashim seraphim*, literally translated as fiery serpents (Coogan 165). These creatures descend from the sky and start biting the wandering Jews and, after one bite, the victims fall dead. Moses prays to God for mercy and a voice from heaven instructs him to erect a bronze statue of a snake. If ever a person is bitten, all he must do is look upon the statue and he will be healed. For Jesus, then, seeing his master move his arms in a serpentine motion, and watching as he slides and slithers his hands across a wound to apply an ointment, was to see him perform his work skillfully and with divine precision. It would not be, in any way, a hint of evil, menacing, temptation, or untrustworthiness as it might be taken by a contemporary Christian audience.

Thought Verbs, Hiding the Gun, and Establishing Authority

The last few items I want to mention come directly from one of my literary idols, Chuck Palahniuk. In a collection of thirty-six essays on the craft of writing fiction

currently hosted on litreactor.com, the author of *Fight Club* details how he approaches writing with very concrete suggestions and examples. These essays have been, quite possibly, the biggest influence on my own writing style.

One of the essays that I frequently use to teach my freshman writing courses is all about “unpacking thought verbs.” Palahniuk explains that the easiest way to live up to the mantra *show, don’t tell* is by eliminating words like “think, believe, realize, remember, and feel” as well as unnecessary conjugations of the verb “to be” and words like “love” and “hate.” Essentially, the first group of words sets a writer up for internal monologue, something that the reader can’t actually see. It also usually means that the character is alone. The quickest fix for this is to have the character get a phone call, bump into someone he knows, find himself in some action scenario, or flashback to a time when one of these things happened. In *The Servant’s Satchel*, the entire exposition is a string of hallucinations, flashbacks, and visions, which keep Jesus in the company of others until he arrives in the care of the guru. After that point, I don’t have to worry too much about Jesus being alone or bored for very long, so I avoid unnecessary thought verbs altogether.

Palahniuk also describes a pretty underrated fiction writing technique that he calls “hiding the gun.” This phrase comes from a remark Anton Chekhov once made about short stories. To paraphrase, if you take the time to show a reader a gun in a narrative, it must go off at some point. In other words, don’t draw your reader’s attention to useless objects, people, places, etc. Palahniuk’s technique works in reverse. If you know that a character is going to need to use a special tool or skill, that tool or skill must be hidden somewhere earlier on in the work. The best example I have of this device in *The*

Servant's Satchel is the guru's harvesting of the desert-horned viper's venom only to later use it to heal Eli the leper.

Finally, Palahniuk makes a good point in his first essay about establishing authority as a narrator, first person speaker, or for a character. He explains that you can use the "heart method" or the "head method" to accomplish this. The first is a way of employing pathos to have the reader sympathize with a character. Palahniuk's hilarious example describes a time when he was in high school and his basketball teammates decided to coat the crotch of his tighty-whities with Bengay. The theory is that the reader will recall a similar painful experience or moment of embarrassment and then better identify with the character. The "head method" is a way of employing factual information or jargon to create a character or narrator that commands respect because of a wide knowledge base.

I think it's easy enough to see how I employ the "head method" repeatedly in this novella with the constant reference to medical techniques, special herbs, and religious contexts, but the "heart method" deserves some attention. For me, I think one of the most endearing qualities that Jesus possesses is the weight and anger he carries from his days of being teased as a "bastard" (12). For the rest of the novella he has to overcome little fits of anger and frustration like all of us. Another pathetic detail of the protagonist's psyche is his grief regarding Joseph's death and his obsession with "the man who chose to be his father" (16). Even at the very end, after Jesus has forgiven himself and accepted Joseph's death, he is still obsessed with the idea of a father/son relationship. "he focused on that one word: *son*. ... With a final subtle bowing of his anointed head, he turned to walk westward, kicking up the dust with his heels as he marched on, never again to be

truly alone” (122). And it’s not until Jesus resolves this issue in his own mind (now he has his spiritual Father, God and the memory of Joseph, and a tangible one as well in the guru) that he can move on with his life in any sort of meaningful way.

And to conclude, it is the “heart method” that truly gives weight and depth to the final lines of the book. For a hundred pages the reader has seen the protagonist do things that any ordinary, fallible, emotionally fraught human would do, and they have come to identify in some real way with him. So for the ending of the narrative to revolve around Jesus’s ultimate decision to re-enter Galilee for the purpose of “saving” his people, one can’t help but shiver a little at the words of Isaiah. Because after all, Jesus is going to attempt to preach to and heal a group of real people with real superstitions, real fears, and real inadequacies—people like himself, and people like all of us. So it is only right that the book end with what should be known as the subconscious mantra for all writers and professors—*speak so that they may not listen, teach so that they may not understand.*

Works Cited

- Coogan, Michael D. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. Philadelphia: Oxford University Press, 2006. 3-359. Print.
- Dobie, Ann B. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Third ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012. 53-81. Print.
- Estrada, Andrea. "Ancient Cranial Surgery: Practice of Drilling Holes in the Cranium that Dates back Thousands of Years." *sciencedaily.com*. Ed. Dan Hogan and Michele Hogan. N.p., 19 Dec. 2013. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.
- Kunja Lal Bishagratna, Kaviraj. "Sushruta Samhita." *chestofbooks.com*. N.p., 1916. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.
- Missios, S. "Hippocrates, Galen, and the Uses of Trepanation in the Ancient Classical World." *Neurosurgical Focus* 23.1 (2007): 11-17. Print.
- Pagels, Elaine. *Beyond Belief*. New York: Random House, 2003. 1-241. Print.
---. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 2004. 1-182. Print.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. "36 Essays on Craft." *www.litreactor.com*. Ed. Joshua Chaplinsky and Cath Murphy. N.p., 17 Sept. 2011. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.
- Prophet, Elizabeth C. *Fallen Angels and the Origins of Evil*. Corwin Springs: Summit University Press, 200. 99-295. Print.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 3-327. Print.
- Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981. 15-286. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1982. 260-62. Print.

Works Consulted

- Ellis, Harold. *A History of Surgery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Web.
8 Aug. 2013.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Second ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 7-248. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1990. 1-161. Print.
- Kasser, Rodolphe, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst, and Bart D. Ehrman, eds. *The Gospel of Judas*. Second ed. Washington DC: National Geographic, 2008. Print.
- Knight, Damon. *Creating Short Fiction: The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction*. Third ed. New York: Macmillan, 1997. Print.
- Lightfoot, Neil R. *How We Got the Bible*. Third ed. New York: MJF Books, 2003. 33-163. Print.
- Marino, P, and M Gonzales-Portillo. "Preconquest Peruvian Neurosurgeons: A Study of Inca and Pre-Columbian Trephination and the Art of Medicine in Ancient Peru." *Neurology* 47.4 (2000): 940-55. Print.
- New York Writers Workshop. *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. New York: WritersDigest Books, 2006. Print.
- Porter, J R. *The Lost Bible*. New York: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2010. Print.
- Starkey, David. *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 109-34. Print.
- Vermes, Geza. *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. 1-231. Print.