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An Audience with the King

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AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English Literature

by
Charissa Fryberger
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This Creative Thesis attempts to contemplate one aspect of theological inquiry and puzzlement: the enigma of living between an all-powerful, omniscient Divine—the Cosmic King Who is capable of forming a sun or designing a rose—and the intimate Father-God Who holds our tears in His hand. It is an exploration of the indefinable relationship between fallible human beings and an omniscient and all-powerful, yet intimate God. Its variety of texts, though differing in form, all consider what it means to live in the tension of that paradox. The purpose of this work is not to offer answers to any of the questions raised by this inquiry nor to concoct an impossibly definitive response, but rather to open the door to spiritual inquiry in the hope of growth toward new epiphanies of thought and experience.

To accomplish this, this text employs a multifaceted, multi-genre approach designed to contemplate this paradox from a variety of creative angles including essays, poetry, short stories, and trip reports. The document ends with a critical reflection which outlines the literary provenance of these writings and places them in the context of the classical and modern works of devotional literature on whose shoulders they stand.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
PREFACE.....	1
CHAPTER	
1. БЫ OR ТЫ?.....	3
2. TRIP REPORT: AUGUST, 2017.....	10
3. ABBA.....	18
4. IN THE PLAYROOM.....	19
5. A GAME OF CHESS.....	21
6. THE AUGUSTINIAN ANT.....	22
7. NAKED AND UNASHAMED.....	25
8. BEFORE THE KING.....	26
9. THE SONG OF A LONELY KING.....	30
10. THE CHALICE.....	42
11. AN INVITATION TO DINE.....	44
APPENDIX: A CRITICAL REFLECTION.....	55
A. Theme.....	55
B. A Multi-Genre Approach.....	57
C. Trip Report: August, 2017.....	60
D. Abba and In the Playroom.....	61
E. A Game of Chess.....	64

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	Page
F. The Augustinian Ant.....	65
G. Naked and Unashamed and Before the King.....	67
H. The Song of a Lonely King.....	68
I. The Chalice and An Invitation to Dine.....	70
WORKS CITED.....	72

PREFACE

This creative thesis is intended to produce an original work of devotional literature and to contribute this new work into the rich tradition of prose and poetry dedicated to the Christian faith. It focuses on one aspect of theological inquiry and puzzlement: How do we live in constant connection with an all-powerful, omniscient Divine—the Cosmic King capable of forming a sun or designing a rose—and at the same time with the intimate Father-God Who holds our tears in His hand? The paradox I wish to explore is not a new problem; theologians have been wrestling with it since long before Jesus wandered the rocky roads of Palestine, and the shelves of religious libraries around the world are lined with books written by thinkers who have attempted to plum the depth of this enigma. I hope that this is a fresh work, expressed in bright, accessible, modern language which ponders these puzzles in a creative way.

It is my intent to invite the reader to reflect with me about what it means to live in the tension of this paradox. I do not pretend that I can offer an answer to this ancient question; the task of this work is not to concoct an impossibly definitive response, but rather to develop a multi-faceted, multi-genre inquiry and to inspire growth toward new epiphanies of thought and experience. I want this work to be a catalyst for real thinking and honest consideration of both aspects of God’s character and of our relationship with Him in regard to each. I hope it will be a generator of new “aha!” moments, as well as occasions for profound contemplation.

To this end, this work is not aimed at an academic audience, nor a secular one; neither is it intended to be an evangelical work, nor an apologetic which makes arguments

for the validity of Christianity. Instead, it is designed for a specific audience which understands the Biblical narrative and the assumptions that undergird the Christian faith. It is intended to invite those who already hold Christian beliefs to think more deeply about the faith they follow and to consider new perspectives on already familiar concepts.

Since every act of rhetoric makes certain assumptions and chooses particular language and forms based on the audience for which it is written, my rhetorical intentions for this work place my thesis committee at something of disadvantage. I have asked them to review this thesis not as they would typically look at an academic work, but with the assumed eye of the audience for whom this work is created.

ВЫ OR ТЫ?

When I had the opportunity to teach at the Kazakh American Free University in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan several years ago, I attended church and was surprised to hear God addressed with the familiar Russian pronoun ТЫ. As is done in many languages, Russian uses two different word forms for what we translate to English as “you.” One is the familiar ТЫ (tee), which is used for family, close friends, and people of similar status as ourselves. The other is the more formal ВЫ (vwee), which provides an address for people with whom we aren’t on such comfortable terms: elders, those of greater status, people we don’t know well.

Why, I wondered, was God addressed with ТЫ? After all, this was *God* we were talking to: The Creator of all the universe; the King Whose train had filled the temple of Isaiah’s vision; the all-encompassing cloud Who engulfed Mt. Horeb when Moses ascended. God! Especially in this formal Kazakh/Russian culture, where honoring a person’s status is important, I expected God to be addressed as ВЫ. If my boss or a student’s professor ranked the formal ВЫ, shouldn’t God? Instead, He was approached with the same language that we might use to speak to a child or friend.

This verbal dilemma leaves me pondering: how should we approach God--as ВЫ or ТЫ? Is he King of all the Earth, or the gentle loving Father into Whose lap I crawl? In English, we capitalize words that refer to God, sometimes even including adjectives and pronouns; it is a matter of honor. The ancient Hebrews took this idea of linguistic honor even further, refusing to pronounce the name of God and abbreviating it in written form as

YHVH because it was considered too holy for human use. And yet my Russian friends addressed Him in the comfortable *Ты*? Would we honor Him with a formal equivalent of *Вы* if English contained such a semantic distinction? Or would our more informal culture also address the Friend and Lover of our souls with the familiar *Ты*? Who is He really, *Вы* or *Ты*?

Though this is a minor linguistic predicament, its implications raise a much bigger question which has perplexed both lofty theologians and common pray-ers since the beginning of theological history: Exactly Who is God? And who are we in relation to this All-powerful and All-knowing Deity? Indeed, to consider these questions and to live out our Christian faith is to embrace, and even to revel in, several incomprehensible paradoxes—ideas that seem so contradictory that they must be mutually exclusive, but which, as it turns out, exist side-by-side.

The first of these is the contradiction we find in our own natures. Sometimes, I become intensely aware of being inadequate, insecure and culpable. I find myself drowning in my own bad choices. Yet at other times, I am confident and strong. I know beyond any doubt that I am beloved, cherished, and protected; a daughter of the King Himself. The 18th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal wrote, “What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe” (Pascal 149-154). No wonder I am confused!

The second paradox is equally hard to get our minds around: that of the incongruity within God’s character. On one hand, we are told that God is so far beyond our

comprehension that our small intellects can't begin to plumb His depth. Isaiah quotes God saying, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (English Standard Version, Isa 55.8-9). In the New Testament, God's ascendancy is described in regard to the Second Person of the Trinity, saying, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb,1.3).

We worship the God who made the stars and designed the intricacies of the human eye; Who built galaxies and holds the nucleus of each tiny atom together with a strong nuclear force that scientists still can't fully define or understand. His thoughts truly are beyond our thoughts. Yet, at the same time, He is as close as the "pneuma," the breath or spirit within us (Bell). He numbers our hairs, and He knows our hearts better than we know them ourselves. He is right here with us—Emmanuel.

The famous prayer, St. Patrick's Breastplate, puts it like this:

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
(Davies 78).

God truly is beyond our comprehension...and He is a bit scary. He can look into our thoughts, know our histories, see our motivations, and touch our souls. For the conflicted creature Pascal describes, facing this overwhelmingly awe-inspiring Personage Who knows our intimate secrets could indeed be reason to flee as rapidly as possible in the opposite direction (though I'm not sure which way might *be* the opposite direction from God). Unless somehow, He knows all about us, and (inexplicably) likes us anyway...indeed, loves us; unless, rather than threatening, He really is inviting us to rest and revel in the love of a gentle Father.

Most Christians understand intellectually that both descriptions of God's character are true, but experientially, we separate them—sometimes thinking of awesome Divinity, and other times cuddling up in His Fatherly kindness. How do we learn to experience all that God is, both God the eminent and God the intimate at the same time? How can we, who are insignificant and flawed, yet beloved and made holy, reverently kneel before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and at the same time trust and cherish the intimate Lover of our Souls? How do we get our minds around that dichotomy, which isn't really a dichotomy at all, but a mysterious unity?

And so, I'm back to my original question: Should I address God as Вы or Ты?

It seems that most other languages which make a distinction between familiar and formal pronouns are in agreement with the Russians. God, it seems, is typically addressed in the friendly and the familiar. English, with its strange penchant for exceptions and for exceptions to its exceptions has taken the opposite approach—but with some exceptions. Most English speakers use only one second person pronoun: you. We make no division

regarding who that “you” might be, so God, like everyone, else is addressed simply as “You.” “You,” however, is actually the formal form of the word. Once upon a time, English did make the distinction: “ye” or “you” was the formal pronoun and “thou” or “thy” was used among those who knew each other well. “Thou” sort of fell out of English in the 17th and 18th centuries, leaving us with no other choice but “you” (Brown and Gilman 252).

Consequently, English speakers seem to run counter to their international brothers and sisters, addressing God in the secretly-formal “You” form. Except (we are, after all, talking about English) in many church-related contexts like prayer books, hymns, formal services, and the popularly-repeated versions of the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm, that archaic 17th century “thou” still shows up. So, in the end, the only place where we English speakers still regularly use the familiar address is when we approach God. Even we, who are reluctant to make a formal/familiar distinction, speak to God in our nearest equivalent of the *Ты*.

I’m not looking to argue over semantics with the whole rest of the world, but I am still a little torn. When I sit down with a cup of coffee, curl my feet under me, and open my Bible to read His letter to me, He is decidedly *Ты* —my Father, my Friend, my Confidant. But there I go again, capitalizing the names of the Creator-King of all that is. Perhaps I will stick with my simple modern English “You,” which encompasses both aspects—at least now, in the 21st century. After considering its Russian counterparts, however, I will say, “You are my Lord and my God,” with a greater awareness of both my Father and my King. It is that considerations which has led to the writing of this book.

My husband and I are fourteeners climbers (in our home state of Colorado, fifty-four peaks rise to an elevation of 14,000 feet or more), and perhaps our beloved mountains can provide an analogy for what I wish to accomplish in the following pages. When we climb a mountain, we do not climb straight up its face. In most cases, such a climb would be impossible; at best it would be dangerous and exhausting. Rather, we follow the trail for many more miles than the actual distance between our outset and the summit, switch-backing back and forth, or circling the rocky mass in search of climbable rocks and hikeable ridges. Sometimes we can see the rocky prominence at the top and get a glimpse of the goal. Other times it disappears behind a nearer outcropping, only to reappear further down the trail from an entirely different angle.

By the time we summit, we have looked at the mountain from a thousand viewpoints; we have seen it from far off and from close enough to put out a hand and touch its steep face. Its topography no longer appears as a point poking into the sky, but rather as a myriad of crevasses and ledges; terrifying drop-offs and solid rocks the size of skyscrapers; trickling streams and snowfields that never melt, even in the heat of July. From the peak, we can look back at the trail and know that we have, indeed, become acquainted with the mountain in a whole new way.

This is how I want to consider the simultaneously omnipotent and intimate God: gazing up at Him from far below, navigating the ups and downs and ins and outs of His personality and His relationship to us, and reaching out to touch His face. Some of the writings in this book will be essays and observations; some will do the work of exegesis of scriptural passages; some will be imaginings—fictions drawn from between the lines of

scripture and of life; some will be letters, poems, images, and analogies. Some will include common phrases and comfortable words; others will describe God and our connection with Him in ways that may seem odd or awkward, even risky. I invite you to let each viewpoint, whether familiar or downright uncomfortable, to serve as an opportunity to explore the wonder of Who He is more deeply.

This book is both my offering to my King and my gift to you, the reader. I invite you to explore with me the many facets of God's character as we discover a greater capacity to delight in the embrace of both the Sustainer of all we know and all we will never know and the Papa who gently lifts our faces to look into our eyes and gather our tears into His hand. And I hope as you read, that now and then a particular phrase or idea will jump off the page and make you catch your breath as it suddenly brings you a clearer awareness of His presence right here next to you--a breath of fresh God.

TRIP REPORT: AUGUST, 2017

I am now in South Carolina, and tomorrow I will walk into my first grad class at Clemson University. I have been telling people that I am alternately excited and terrified. This is a new journey—a chance to step into a new season of life, and an opportunity to serve God in a completely new way, in a new place, among a vastly different group of people than I’ve ever served before. It is a grand adventure. It is also frighteningly unfamiliar. I will be an old woman among twenty-five-year-olds; I will struggle with tech that they use intuitively; I will hold faith and values they consider old-fashioned and ridiculous. Will they accept me or dislike me? Will we be able to communicate, miss each other like ships in the night, or worse yet, offend each other?

The process of getting here has brought many frustrations. The last month seemed like swimming through molasses as I tried to get everything ready to leave, packing up our home of twenty-one years and facing unexpected medical issues which have, unfortunately, followed me to South Carolina. The final difficulty came when I spent the night before I had planned to leave sitting up with Captain, my 17-year-old Newfoundland, as he was dying. I spent the next day in tears and left 24 hours later than planned. I cried all the way to New Mexico.

Even so, it has seemed that every sermon, book, song, Bible lesson, and even every walk along the familiar roads of Beulah (the tiny mountain town that I have long called home) has held reminders and symbols that have opened my mind to new ways of looking at the path ahead. I have been in training all summer. I’d like to tell you about one particular “training session.”

Two weeks before I left, David and I took a three-day climb up the Barr Trail to Pikes Peak as a celebration of our 30th wedding anniversary and a chance to climb one last mountain before I left Colorado. We arrived at the bottom of Barr Trail at 6500 feet elevation just in time for a huge rain/hail storm. We huddled with other hikers beneath the eaves of the last bathroom at the trailhead. Finally, the hail subsided and, dressed in rain gear, we started up the path, walking most of the way in a running gully that was supposed to be a trail.

We gained the first 2000 feet in the first 2 ½ miles of steep switchbacks, finally meeting the top of the Manitou Incline. It was a hard, wet climb, and I started to wonder why I had chosen this as our anniversary celebration; after all, David had offered me a Marriot in Denver instead. Still, we kept climbing, and it kept raining.

By mile 3, the path had leveled out, though it was still making definite uphill progress. By mile marker 4 ½ I was tired—and tired of walking in wet shoes with my 22-pound pack on my back. By mile marker 6, I was wet and cold and just wanted to be at our campsite. Finally—Barr Camp appeared.

We arrived just in time to drop our packs and go into the cabin for dinner: spaghetti and dark garlic bread that reminded me of the soda bread we'd enjoyed in Ireland. I'm not usually a fan of spaghetti, but this tasted great. We checked into our lean-to (sort of a raised wooden tent, open to one side, but with the luxury of a real mattresses instead of sleeping on the ground). We rolled out our sleeping bags and hung up our gear to dry. Then we went back to the main cabin (which had solar power, and thus lights) and cuddled up on the couch to read together before going to bed.

Even so, the weather report for the next day did not look promising: rain predicted to begin by 10:00 am with thunder storms by noon—not long enough to make the summit 6 miles and 4000 vertical feet away—especially not for me, as I am a slow climber. It was the kind of weather report that would normally have caused David to postpone a summit attempt for a different day for safety reasons; a climber’s greatest fear is a thunderstorm.

As we lay in our sleeping bags trying to get warm enough to fall asleep, we discussed our alternatives. We could set out in the morning and see how far we got before the rain turned us around; we could climb in the rain as long as it didn’t thunder (which definitely didn’t sound like fun—I do not like wet feet!); or we could not try at all—just head back down the 6 miles to Manitou and go find that Marriot—with a hot tub. We didn’t make a decision but chose to wait and see what morning looked like.

We woke to thick, whole-grain pancakes filled with apples and nuts and drenched in maple syrup. Barr Camp is definitely the luxury way to climb. Most summit attempts begin with a little lukewarm water poured from a thermos over instant oatmeal. The sky was cloudy, but not yet dripping. We decided to see how far we could get before the rain set in, so we set off “down” the trail—actually, it was decidedly UP since we had 4000 feet to gain over the next 6 miles. Somewhere in the second mile, after we had begun the first set of steep switchbacks, I had a little conversation with myself.

“It’s really not that big a deal if I don’t make the summit. This is supposed to be a fun anniversary celebration with David, and walking 12 miles up and down in the rain does not sound like fun. I can let this go. We’ll just go as far as the A-frame (a landmark hut at tree-line), look at the view, and go back to cuddle up and relax at Barr Camp for the rest of

the day. It's not important that I make the summit." All of a sudden, God broke into my string of justifications.

"Is it important that you graduate?"

I was taken by surprise. I hadn't even been thinking about grad school or the fact that I was on the brink of leaving for Clemson. I was just climbing the mountain and trying to keep breathing as the oxygen got thinner.

"Well... Yes," I sort of stammered aloud.

God spoke in no more clear words, but the sense of His presence and the symbolic nature of this hike became more and more clear as I trudged upward. There were a dozen places where I would have turned back, except that I felt God had told me to make that summit and had promised to give me the strength to do so, even when I thought I was all done. The whole hike became a symbolic microcosm of grad school: it will be hard—a challenge at the edge of my capabilities. It will require persistence, will, and God's strength to finish it. I cannot do it without Him, but neither will I have to. In this climb up Pikes Peak, God was promising to hike through the next two years with me.

And despite the threatening skies, He held back the rain! We made the A-frame at about 10:00 a.m. to a sky full of gray, boiling clouds, but no deluge...and no thunder, which would have forced us to turn around. We climbed above tree line. We would be exposed the rest of the way—a hard, slow, steep three miles over rocky, open terrain. I thought we should have reached each mile marker long before we actually passed it.

At one switchback, as we turned to look out over the panorama of layered mountains with Colorado Springs in the distance and swirling clouds above, I broke into

tears. It is not unusual for me to cry with fatigue on the way to a summit, but this was not fatigue. I suddenly realized that I had to climb this high so I could look out over Colorado and say, “Goodbye.” It brings the tears all over again as I sit here and write about it. David put his arms around me and I stood looking out over home through my tears.

We turned back to the trail: a mile and a half and 1400 feet to go. Like all 14ers, it grew steeper, rockier, harder to breathe. At one mile to the top, the summit looked no nearer than it had at two miles. Could I make it? God had said to do it—so I kept trudging. The clouds continued to threaten, but it still didn’t rain. At 500 feet below the summit, I began to feel nauseous and my head began to hurt. It worsened as I climbed—altitude sickness.

Finally—the last few switchbacks. We summited just after noon. I’d made the top—my 17th summit. Most of all, I’d done what God has asked me to do—I’d graduated, at least symbolically. But I felt terrible.

The Pikes Peak summit is like no other. Most are lonely mountain tops covered with rocks and peopled only by the few hikers who have gotten there ahead of us (and an occasional pika). Pikes Peak can be reached by car, by shuttle, or by cog rail, and it is a popular destination for Colorado Springs tourists. It is a circus on top with a gift shop, restaurant, and its own signature donut bakery. I wanted none of it. I used the bathroom and put my head down on a table in the snack bar. I almost went to sleep, while David bought a couple of bottles of fruit juice (his magic elixir for getting back down the mountain).

David woke me, poured half a bottle of grape juice down my throat and steered me outside to take the requisite summit pictures. I really didn’t want to start back down. If

tickets on the cog hadn't been sold out since May, I would have happily accepted a ride. As it was, what goes up must come down, and David and I both knew I'd feel better 500 feet down the hill, so we started our descent. Still, no rain.

Going down did help the altitude sickness, but I'm even slower downhill than up, carefully placing my feet and protecting my knees (which always complain about the descending portion of a climb). At about a mile and a half, we heard the first thunder. We were on the open rock field—the “long switchback”—with nowhere to go but onward. Thunder on a peak, with thousands of tons of rocks above us ready to avalanche if hit by lightning, is usually scary. This time, while I did have a sense of urgency that kept me trudging along toward the relative safety of tree line, I wasn't scared. I still felt a strong sense of God's protection. He had told me to go on to the summit despite the threatening clouds; He had held off the rain for more than four hours beyond what is usually an amazingly accurate prediction; and I was still walking inside the umbrella of His promise. But I was tired...and slow...and the thunder kept rumbling. We could see a thunderstorm building off to our right.

It began to rain about mile marker 2, and we stopped to put on our rain gear. But then it stopped—we didn't get wet at all. Finally, we reached tree line and stopped for a late lunch at the A-frame, then hiked on...and on...and on...and on. The next 3 miles felt like forever. By the time we came across the last meadow and David pointed out the wildflowers, I told him that they were pretty, but I didn't care. I was just looking for Barr Camp to appear around each bend. Finally, it did; we were still dry. When we'd made our reservations, Barr Camp was full for Saturday evening, so David had brought his tent for

us to sleep in the second night. When we arrived, however, God provided an added blessing.

“Hey, we saved the anniversary suite for you,” Zach, the caretaker, called out as we climbed the steps to the cabin porch; he’d had a cancellation. The “anniversary suite” was a dormitory with about 20 other hikers, but I was truly grateful—a mattress to sleep on and no wet tent. It did, indeed, rain that night, but we were safe and dry inside the cabin.

The next morning after a leisurely breakfast of more of those wonderful pancakes, we said goodbye to the caretakers and headed down the mountain toward Manitou. I was very tired from the previous day, but in good spirits. The weather prediction, however, was even worse than the day before. Rain on the way down was inevitable.

The first 3 miles were very pleasant, but the fact that we were on the last few of the 24-mile roundtrip began to catch up with me. Carrying the pack got harder, and I began to stumble. At 4 miles, I fell—twice—and became even slower as I stepped more carefully. I prayed again for no injuries. I kept looking for the 4 ½ -mile marker and kept trudging. Had I missed it? No, my estimation of mileage is terrible when I’m tired. Still, no marker. We were dropping altitude rapidly. Finally, we passed the 5½-mile marker. Somehow, we had missed noticing both the 4 ½ and the 5-mile marker posts. Of course, we’d really walked the whole distance, but it felt like God had taken a mile out of the trek.

Suddenly we were down! We walked the easy, flat half-mile to the shuttle stop and were soon at the car. It hadn’t rained the whole way. We got into my Buick and headed for home. Then the sky opened up.

Now, after a 3-day drive, I find myself far away from Pikes Peak and Colorado and David. Here in South Carolina, I am preparing to climb another summit, four-semester in elevation. I suspect I will experience rocky trails, steep climbs, and fatigue—maybe altitude sickness of another kind. I will, however, not be hit by any storm violent enough to turn me back; I walk under God’s umbrella. I suspect that I will also discover panoramas of understanding I have never seen before, fresh ideas blowing in the wind, and delicate Southern flowers springing from under rocks along the path. I have much to learn. God and (after a brief time apart) David will walk the trail by my side all the way to this new summit.

ABBA

I go looking for God
calling out, "Come, Lord,"
and a voice answers:
"I Am here."
I turn toward the sound
and find Him enthroned,
encompassing the stars
which are the work of his fingers,
yet mysteriously encompassed by them—
as they encircle his shoulders
like glittering, celestial fireflies.
He sits above all
looking over all
illuminated by a light
beyond the sun.
He reaches out a colossal hand to me.
I squeal, "Abba!"
and His great face beams with delight
as He stoops to greet me.
Laughing, I run up to his knees;
Laughing, he receives my tiny embrace.
He lifts me into His lap
and lets me play
with the diamonds and sapphires
that adorn his fingers.
His stars twinkle above us,
winking at each other
as I grow tired and lay my head
in the gentle hand
of the King of all creation,
My Daddy.

IN THE PLAYROOM

I stand in the middle of the floor, a tiny child in the playroom. Around me lay my toys. A matchbox car that really does go “vroom vroom” down the road; picture books that tell animated stories of real or imagined places—I’m not always sure that I know the difference; pick-up-sticks that I never pick up. My Legos lay scattered about—bricks with which I try to construct architecture and sculptures like my Father’s. What I build remains stiff and square with lots of rough edges; His are smooth and supple. They glow with color and breathe with life.

Sometimes, I am a misbehaved little girl. Here I sit, trying to imitate my Father’s harmony and design and color and poetry, while I treat the people in my life, who are wonderful creations of His, like toy dolls, expecting them to say the words I tell them to say and do what I ask. When they don’t, I get angry and break them. Or I abandon them, leaving them alone and strewn about the floor among the other toys. My Father is happier when I pick them up and care for them as playroom friends.

Over there, under the window is a stack of crayons and colored pencils. I use them to draw stick figures of lions with pointy ears and long whiskers or spotted cows with cartoon bubbles that say, “Moo.” I try to copy my Father’s menagerie of creatures, but my facsimiles can never begin to match what He can do with just a breath. Oh yes, there’s the toy piano that plinks out childish songs and poems, trying to add a tiny strain to my Father’s universal symphony. Occasionally, I gather up the bright-pink satin dress-up gown that lays crumpled in the corner. With it I cover my ordinary clothes and pretend, for a few minutes, to be a princess.

Yet when I raise my eyes from the playroom floor—when I look up into my Father’s face in the heavens, He is not disappointed with my feeble efforts or my childish games. He is pleased when I try to imitate Him—to follow His act of creation—though my powers to build are so much silliness compared with His. He reaches down and invites me to take His hand so that He can guide me on a tour of the real universe He is constantly creating all around me. He shows me the rocks and trees and mountains; the desert flowers, and ocean froth and snowy peaks. He points out His favorite masterpieces of all—the real people walking around His world, breathing, moving, and creating with Him. He shows me their works of art, too—still no match for His, but wonderful attempts, with which He is pleased.

We return to the playroom; I look about the floor. These are the tools and materials He has put into my life so that I can create with Him. I guess I don’t always take very good care of them. Together we clean up the playroom floor and put everything in its place so that it doesn’t get spoiled or broken, and so I can find each gifted item when I need it.

Then the King of heaven, Who created all that is, kneels on the floor beside me. He picks up a purple crayon and puts it in my hand. As I sit on the floor—crisscross applesauce—and lean over a bright yellow piece of construction paper, He places his huge, warm hand over my little one, and we begin to draw a sunset. He helps me find the words to describe it in a hand-scrawled poem at the bottom of the page. With His help, I too begin to create—to co-create—with Him. And He smiles at my efforts.

I look down and realize that I am still wearing the pink satin dress-up gown. That’s OK, because I really am a princess, a daughter of the King.

A OF
GAME CHESS

He looks across eight squared
 not only squares,
but infinity Reaching
 cubed cubes. multi-dimensionally,
He plans opening
 His clever move.
Yet, sitting He touches
 quietly, no pieces;
His chessmen from square
 move to square
Under power
 their own and volition.

He is the Master,
but He empowers the king
 to move with confidence
 and regal wisdom
 in any direction;

He emboldens the queen
 to leap bravely
 across the colors
 as far as she wishes;

He equips the knight
 to march down
 wisely-plotted,
 strategic paths;

He enlightens the bishop,
 sending him
 on unique
 diagonal missions;

And He enfolds the humble pawn
 in love
 and protection,
 trudging
 by his side,
 step-by-
 slow-step.

THE AUGUSTINIAN ANT

When we pass by something, failing to see it because it is so small that it has slipped our notice, we say that we have “overlooked” it. If, on the other hand, we pass by something, failing to see it because it so completely fills our field of vision that it is without edges or parameters, could we say that we have “underlooked” it? I fear that, often, this is how we see, or fail to see God. If He is indeed everywhere, then He is here, now, watching as we scurry around like unending lines of sugar ants, dutifully taking care of all the important and not-so-important details of our lives.

Or is He?

If I can pass through whole days without noticing Him, how can I know that He is here at all? Perhaps I *am* just a sugar ant, among many other sugar ants, busying myself with tasks that have little significance beyond the meaning I give them during my own short life. How can I know He is really listening when I pray?

Certainly, I’m not the first to puzzle over such a question. Even thinkers like Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas), Anselm of Canterbury (Himma), Blaise Pascal (Pascal 149-154), and William Paley (Anonymous) have struggled in trying to demonstrate God’s presence. St. Augustine (Augustine), who had great faith that God was with him, wrestled with many words in his attempts to understand and explain the God in Whom he so passionately believed.

Their failures to confirm God’s existence should come as no surprise. Indeed, if God is as resplendent, as invincible, as omniscient, as pervasive as Christians presume, human intellectual tools and perceptions are wholly insufficient for the task of perceiving,

much less proving Him. Even an intellect like Augustine's would be like the sugar ant who, in the course of its daily routine of carrying supplies back to its nest, bumps up against the toe of a man standing in its path. The miniscule creature cranes its neck (if indeed, ants have necks) and strains its eyes toward great heights to catch a glimpse of the titanic human toenail. If that ant, with no more than its ground-level perspective and limited experience, were to attempt to convince the other ants that this toenail they thought they could just barely see when the light was right, was but the smallest appendage of a colossal and sentient being whose loftiness reached into the heavens, which of them would believe him?

If, however, this Augustinian ant was returning from the long and arduous climb up a near-by tree on which he had ascended to great height and looked this mythical human creature in the eye, perhaps his awe-filled account describing its sheer size and beauty and wisdom would prove more persuasive. If, in fact, many ants had taken such a journey in search of the human-beyond-the-toenail and returned with similar stories of its astounding presence, would their combined testimony convince their fellows to at least consider the possibility that this mystical Being did truly exist?

I can no more prove God than Augustine and Anselm could, but I can add my voice to theirs and join those who have told this legendary story for millennia, describing the God-beyond-the-toenail into Whose eyes we have peered, Whose voice we have heard, and Whose touch we have felt. But the Being we describe is not only a distant and colossal presence. Though He is every bit as comparatively large and indescribable as the owner of the toenail our Augustinian ant encountered, He is also nearby and familiar—as close as my next thought. If I am standing before my classroom teaching, He is among my students;

if I am writing on my computer, He is proofreading the text with me; if I am having coffee with a friend, He laughs at my silly puns; if I am doing laundry or washing dishes, He is sharing in my chores.

Most of the time, I am busy thinking about my daily responsibilities and the common minutiae of my life, and I don't notice that He is hanging around. He is so big and so constantly present that He continues to slip my notice, but that doesn't mean He isn't there; only that I have overlooked Him.

NAKED AND UNASHAMED

In my very human marriage,
I can stand
before my husband
naked
and unashamed,
but can I imagine walking
up the aisle
of a heavenly Cathedral
wearing nothing but my faith?
I fear that it may be
neither so complete
nor so substantial
as to provide
adequate covering,
a whispery, opaque shroud
that is easily seen through.
I fear I would be naked
and very much ashamed.
I would tug it
nervously
around me,
clutching it
to myself,
but it would
still not be
enough.
Can I stand
before the God
of all the universe
wearing nothing but this?

Dress me, Lord,
in a faith so rich and elegant
that I may stand before you
no longer naked
because I am unashamed.

BEFORE THE KING

I have come here to pray before the High King of Heaven.

Panting from the exertion of climbing the steep stairs past flocks of huddled and dripping pigeons, I reach the immense front door and step out of the rain into the foyer of His great cathedral. I gaze about in deep awe. Paneled in rich, dark wood with creamy marble floors, this elegant narthex is stunning in every detail. I pause to breathe, listening to the quiet trickle of the ivy-covered fountain recessed into the far wall. Across from where I've entered two maple doors—great slabs of wood inlaid with delicate images from the life of Christ—stand at attention, guarding the passage into His sanctuary. My tiptoed steps echo a bit as I cross the marble toward them. The doors are heavy, extending three times my height, but perfectly balanced. I pull one of them open just a crack, enough to peer inside.

The sanctuary stretches the length of an airplane runway before me. The walls are paneled in the same rich wood, but the floors inside blaze with colors, a luminous marble pavement carefully arranged in elaborate mosaics. Shimmering stained glass windows run up each wall, and pillars soar to great heights, drawing my eyes into the ethereal. At the front of the cathedral, broad marble steps trimmed in gold lead up to an enormous throne where sits... my King.

He is dressed in silks the colors of jewels and around his shoulders hangs a radiant cape embroidered with gold and copper thread like no fabric I've ever seen before. It spills down the steps and seems to fill the sanctuary. Behind him, the golden pipes of an extraordinary organ reach toward the far-away ceiling. The King sits surrounded by angels

and apostles, as well as those who have kept the faith and honored Him with their lives. His Son stands by his side. I recognize Him: my Lord and my Friend. His robe, seamless and made from the softest wool, also glows with power and warmth. The King and His Son converse quietly.

Though I try to remain unobtrusive and unnoticed, the King looks up and sees me peeking through the door. He motions for me to come in. My heart begins to beat faster. This *is* what I came for—to see Him—to speak with Him. Yet now that I'm here, I'm not so sure this was a good idea. How can I face Him? How can I presume to talk to Him?

I am not among those who have kept the faith. Often, I have turned aside, distracted by a myriad of earthly inventions. Because I have been concerned with myself, I have missed opportunities to listen to the cares of others. I have been defensive, sometimes striking out in anger or fear. I have forgotten to ask His advice and His direction, determinedly setting out on my own paths, then being surprised when they come to dead ends. I have known about Him, wondered at Him, worshipped Him...but not always followed. Now that I'm here, what can I say to Him?

Again, He beckons me to come in.

I look down at my ragged skirt. My blouse is in tatters with a coffee stain down the front. I fiddle with the one glove that I found lying in the street outside. My dripping shoes are rapidly causing a shallow pool to form on the marble at my feet. This is the best I have, but I am certainly not dressed for an audience with the King. Perhaps, I should change my mind. I consider turning to flee, but He beckons me a third time. Slowly, I slip through the

narrow opening and turn toward the throne. Awkwardly, I walk down the center aisle. Silently, a million—no, more than a million—countless eyes watch my quiet progress.

I stop at the bottom of the steps, unable to move closer. I do not belong here, and yet here I stand, looking up into the face of the King. Out there, in the street, I felt confident and strong. I held my head up, ready to face with pride whatever came, but here I am undone. In the light of His glory, I view myself truly. My inadequacies are obvious for all to see. I've come empty-handed, with nothing to offer my King. This cannot end well.

I cannot speak. I have no words to express my sorrow. Melting into a puddle of tears, I fall to my knees, keeping my eyes on the cold stones before me. Suddenly, I am engulfed in warmth. It flows over me, through me. Pouring through my matted hair and over my tired body, it splashes onto the floor around me. It leaves me clean and refreshed. My ashen hair turns blonde again. The filth is gone from my skin. Even my fingernails are no longer grimy. I look up. My Lord stands by my side with a dove cooing quietly on his shoulder.

I am left kneeling, unclad before Him, my ragged clothes having been washed away in the deluge. I am clean, but naked and poor in spirit. Those rags were all I had; I have no virtue of my own with which to cover myself. I still have nothing to offer Him. I shiver.

But He does not leave me exposed for long. In an instant, my Lord has leaned down and swept His robe around my shoulders. I am completely covered. It feels soft and clean and warm—comfortable, as if this is what I was always meant to wear. My face shines above the soft wool as I look up once again into the eyes of the King. He smiles, no longer seeing the shamed and tattered girl who slipped through the door into His chamber, but

rather, one He loves, richly arrayed in the finery of His Son and joyfully bearing His own image. Jesus takes my elbow and gently helps me to stand.

“Welcome, my child,” the King says. “You’ve come home. Come. Sit with me.”

With His arm around my shoulder, my Lord walks with me up the steps. With a smile, He presents me to His Father. The King looks deeply into my soul and delights in the Truth He placed in my inward being (*Ps. 51.6*).

“Sit down with me,” the King repeats. “We have much to say to each other.” And He begins to teach His wisdom to my secret heart (*Ps. 51.6*).

THE SONG OF A LONELY KING

Adam and Eve hung out in the garden, sharing company, conversation, chores, and sex without dissension or interruption, and the Spirit of God walked the garden trails with them in the cool of the evenings. God Himself saw and declared that it was all good.

All except one thing—in the middle of the garden stood a tree—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If everything around them was good, why was there—how, indeed, could there have been—any concept, least of all “knowledge,” of evil at all. Did the first couple even understand the meaning of the word? Did they have any mental hooks to hang that idea of badness on? Why did God, Who is Goodness Himself, allow this suggestion of evil to remain in His perfect place? Why did He permit satan to infiltrate His paradise in the guise of the serpent to bring the suggestion that choosing anything but God’s carefully crafted plan was possible?

These were not accidents or oversights—this is God we’re talking about: The Omniscient and All-powerful. These were intentional choices by the Divine. In the midst of all this good, God allowed evil to cast its shadow. Why?

Fast forward several thousand years to Solomon, son of the great King David, a very powerful but also very human king, who had repented from his own flirtations with evil (adultery and murder, to be exact). Solomon had stepped up (after a rather dramatic argument with a usurping brother) to his father’s throne. He, too, was both powerful and human. Though he had a reputation for extraordinary wisdom, not all of his policies were wise; personally, I wouldn’t have wanted to live under his tax code. As king, he also enjoyed the trappings of royalty: a palace that truly was built for a king, servants and

officials who carried out his every wish, the command of a large and well-equipped army, and wives—700 of them, plus a few stray concubines. No young woman in his realm could refuse the king—at least it wouldn't have been a good idea. Everyone did his bidding, whether it involved what he wanted for dinner, what color the hangings of the new temple should be, or who would be sleeping with him that night.

Solomon was a man who had, or could have, anything he wished for, but his life was not without frustration or depression. It was indeed *this* king, reputed to be the wisest man who'd ever lived, who wrote in *Ecclesiastes*, “When I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (*Ecc*, 1.14)

It was also Solomon who penned the Bible's premier love story, *The Song of Songs*. In this hot-blooded tale, the king (often assumed to be Solomon himself) is involved in a steamy courtship and marriage with a woman we know only as his “Shulammite Bride” (*Song of Songs*, 6.13). The inclusion of *Song of Songs* in the Biblical cannon has been a puzzle to many and an embarrassment to some. For several thousand years, theologians have attempted to explain, justify, and come to peace with what, at least on first glance, appears to be a very sensual, even sexual narrative. Some commentators have accepted it as just that: a steamy account of an actual love affair between Solomon and a beloved wife (though they disagree widely on which wife she was). They suggest that the purpose behind *Song of Songs* is to picture and emphasize the sacred importance of marriage. Others have stepped over the sensual nature of the literature (at times turning verbal back handsprings to pretend the book's more sexual comments don't mean what they appear to

say) to focus on a symbolic or allegorical approach. They suggest that the story is really about the spiritual relationships between God and the Jewish people, Christ and the Church, the Holy Spirit and Mary, or God and each individual beloved believer. Others insist that both approaches are true, and that this enigma of Biblical literature is doing its work on a variety of simultaneous levels.

I don't wish to question 3000 years of Biblical scholarship, nor would I want to argue with the likes of John of the Cross, Gregory the Great, or Thomas Aquinas. Still, I wonder...

Imagine Solomon, the Israelite king who has had the task of designing and building God's temple handed down to him by his iconic father. This was a man who was very conversant with symbols of the Divine and could certainly have written a spiritual parable. He was also a political king who ruled over the most peaceful era in Jewish history. He was in the business of making deals and establishing alliances. That, in fact, is where some of his many wives came from—using marriages to seal political deals was a pretty common practice. He *could* have fallen madly in love with one of them and recorded the account of their affair in his amorous poem.

But what if *Song of Songs* grew out of a completely different element of Solomon's experience. What if Solomon wrote it not as an intentional parable nor as an account of his own relationship with a favorite wife, but as a fantasy—a personal romance novel written out of the longings of a lonely king? Perhaps the man in *Song of Songs* was, indeed, the writer himself, but what if the woman we've never been able to positively identify never existed at all?

I know that in many circles, my suggestion that part of the Bible isn't merely metaphorical, but is actually imaginary may be met with cries of heresy (though some have made similar claims about the book of *Job*). Still, I will ask you, please, to bear with me for a few minutes more before lighting the sticks beneath the heretic's stake.

By the end of his reign, we are told that Solomon was the husband of 700 wives (1 *Kings*, 11.3) but *Song of Songs* was written early in his reign when his harem held only "sixty queens and eighty concubines..." and of course, "virgins without number" (*Song of Songs*, 6.8). So, what was it like to be one of Solomon's wives? I don't think any surviving literature gives a direct answer, but perhaps the story of Esther, though it takes place some years after Solomon in the court of the Persian king, Ahasuerus, can shed some light on the way this harem thing worked in the ancient Near East. Beautiful girls from throughout the realm and beyond were brought into the harem and prepared for the king. After spending a night with their kingly husband, many of them returned to the chambers of the wives to live out the remainder of their lives. Even if he did request their company again, how often could they have been called, with 699+ other women about?

Could it be that over time, Solomon, the king who could have any woman he wanted, as long as she wasn't previously married to someone else (Solomon's parents had broken that rule and the results had been dire), grew frustrated and dissatisfied with this unending stream of beautiful virgins? Could it be that in practice, serial wives are not much different from serial one-night stands which eventually become empty, even boring? Could it be that, in the end, polygamy is not all it's cracked up to be? What if this well-sexed king, who later in life wrote that, "There is nothing new under the sun" (*Ecc*, 1.9), became

the loneliest man in the palace. Despite his many wives, Solomon lacked what Adam had had—a partner. Could it be that Solomon longed for something deeper—a relationship that could satisfy not only his body but also his heart and his soul?

And so, on one solitary night, the king goes to his chamber, not with the latest hot brunette in harem pants, but rather with a bottle of ink and a blank scroll. There he begins to dream on paper (or rather, on vellum). He imagines a woman not dressed in palace finery, but with her skin burned by the sun after spending her days working in the vineyard—a commoner, unaccustomed to royal etiquette. He dips his pen, but hesitates for a moment, chewing on its end. Who is she? She is someone he can go secretly to visit, joyfully bounding over the hills like a young stag on his way to her house, rather than having her simply brought to his chamber. He can slip out to see her alone, without his entourage of body guards and officials. The sudden thought of her in the midst of a state meeting might make him catch his breath and hide his smile behind a piece of official parchment. Recalling the silhouette of her body would render him breathless for a moment and make his heart race even when he is sitting still.

But what might she think of this king who was coming to call? Could she love him—really love *him*? Solomon dips the pen again and starts to write in careful Hebrew letters from right to left across the top of the scroll. He begins his fantasy with her voice as he imagines her imagining him: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (*Song of Songs*, 1.2).

But her passion is not a love he can demand; He must deserve her devotion. Here is a woman whose hand he can take timidly, his own fingers tingling at the anticipation of her touch.

She is not commanded by his every wish; she can run away if she chooses. This is a woman he must court, cater to, invite. He can take her flowers, not knowing if she will accept them...or him. This is a woman who can say no.

For her amusement he can point out the beauty of the hills, the gazelles, the birds, the lilies just to watch the scarlet ribbon of her lips break into a smile. He can ask her to run with him to their own secret spot in the woods and to lay beside him under a canopy of pines. He prays that she will indeed let him kiss her with his mouth and hold her in his arms, reveling in her presence, her warmth, the curve of her breast, the fragrance of her hair against his cheek.

Solomon continues to scratch on the scroll. There will be no sleep for him tonight; the king is entranced. He never tires of picturing her dove-like eyes, her hair tumbling over her shoulders like a flock of goats running down a hillside, her dainty breasts that remind him of twin gazelles. The milk and honey of God's promises are hiding under her tongue. Her eyes overwhelm him, and the spicy scent of her frankincense overcomes the thoughts of everything else in his realm. This mystical lady is a "garden locked," the one for whom he must wait and wish and yearn. He cannot order this woman but waits for her invitation.

Of course, in his fantasy, she does return his adoration. She calls him "radiant" and runs her fingers through his raven-black hair and whispers her appreciation of his polished

chest “bedecked with sapphires.” Here, finally, is the woman who doesn’t love the king, but loves *him*.

He longs to get to know her little by little over a period of years, exploring the idiosyncrasies that make her unique. He wants to find out what she most enjoys, what she thinks about, what she dreams of. He wishes for adventures that only they know about—perhaps an unplanned picnic where the wild apples and apricots and raisins are sufficient to become a banquet because of the love in which they are shared. He makes up the stories she might tell him about the funny things that happen in her day or the dreams she has at night. He imagines sharing his own frustrations or the mysterious occurrences he’s seen or the things that saddened him. Solomon’s other wives are his, but he is not theirs. This is a woman of whom he could truly say “I am my beloved’s” (*Song of Songs*, 7.19).

Solomon’s handwriting grows a bit shaky as he pours his desire onto the scroll, describing his courtship, her adoring response, their marriage, and their lives together. Here on the soft vellum, Solomon finds the one woman who will never live in his harem—the woman he can never have but who commands a fascination and intensity no harem wife has ever matched. She is Solomon’s ideal Dulcinea, and she loves him by her own choice.

This reading of *Song of Songs* remains true to the literal images that adorn the pages of Solomon’s beautiful love poem, and it does nothing to depreciate the value or power of *Song of Songs* as a spiritual narrative. Nor does it contradict our understanding that Scripture is divinely inspired. In fact, the idea of Solomon sitting in deep sighing as he writes in concert with God a story that simultaneously describes the human longings of one

and the Divine desires of the other seems more a product of heavenly inspiration than the simple recounting of a love affair.

Just as we recognize *Ecclesiastes* as the musing of an elderly king looking back over his life, why couldn't *Song of Songs* be the sighing of a younger sovereign wishing for a woman who could forget he was the king? Such an interpretation underscores both the importance of a meaningful and loving marriage between life-long lovers and the figurative commentary on God's relationship with his Church and His people. Indeed, the romantic longings of the king of Judah might shed much light on the heart of the King of all creation. What if this fantasy of a lonely king is also a picture of a creating God Who, like Solomon, wishes for a real relationship rather than a court filled with yes-men and women?

Perhaps here, we must return to Eden.

Could it be that God, too, wanted a relationship with someone who could say no? That He wanted to court us, to woo us, to demonstrate His love for us in the breathless hope that we would *choose* to love Him back? Perhaps God didn't want us to be concubines who were brought to Him in submission whether we wanted to follow or not. Did he plant that tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in his perfect garden so that we would have an alternative? He longed for a bride who could refuse Him, and whose love, if she chose to come into his embrace, would be returned with the same intense eagerness as His own love for her. This is a story about a Deity who loves us completely, deeply, passionately (perhaps that's why Christ's crucifixion is called His Passion). He wishes to be loved in return with that same passion and intensity.

So what is it to be God's lover? To be kissed by him and anointed in His perfume? To sit in His chamber with His full attention? To not only speak the name of God, but to hear it as it pours like oil from my own lips? To Have him take my hand and lead me across the hills?

A human suitor might point out the flowers and figs and foxes, inviting his beloved to enjoy the natural beauty which his lover's-eye has brought into sharper focus. But what if that Lover is God the Creator? Would the beauty surrounding me suddenly become not just wonders to be discovered and shared, but a masterpiece crafted just for me—not just a view, but a gift. Perhaps in that moment, He would not be saying “Isn't this beautiful; come enjoy it with me,” but rather “Look what I've made for you.”

A human lover might bring a bouquet of roses; *this* Lover brings all the roses the world can produce, along with every snow-capped mountain, every pouring waterfall, and every endless grassland populated by birds that chirp and sing and caw and call. All because He loves us. Loves me. How can I receive such an extravagant present? I could turn it down—but why would I? I doubt that I could ever be worth such a love, but here He is loving me. All I can do is melt into His arms and receive His gifts.

Solomon, as the romantic novelist, wishes to be enthralled, encompassed, intoxicated, captured, not only by his bride's beauty (though he is clearly taken with her ravishing appearance) but by the experience of being with her—by a desire that will last beyond the orgasm. It is not just the look of her that delights him, but the way she looks at him. This imaginary woman isn't just one of the harem; she is uniquely one.

If I read *Song of Songs* with God in the Lover's role, I must then realize that the God Who is capable of commanding anything to happen instantly at His word, waits expectantly for my decision. In that waiting does God long for me? Is He delighted when I stop what I am doing and glance His way? Can it be that I hold the spices and fragrant flowers that can enthrall the One who created them? Does He wait for me to choose Him, not because He couldn't command me, but because he has bound Himself not to? How could I not love such a lover?

In *Song of Songs*, the lovers lay together on a deep, green, earthy carpet. He leans his head against her breast and they revel in the quiet. It is the sweet enjoyment of the Lover and the beloved sitting in silence and murmurs, oblivious to the rest of the world, comparing each other to the natural wonders that enhance their time together. I have certainly enjoyed such moments with my husband, David, surrounded by a thrilling calm that notices no other obligations. I have also enjoyed such moments in prayer with God. I sit like Solomon's lady, cuddled into God's chest, completely tranquil, and yet strangely exhilarated by the sense of His all-encompassing and all-consuming love for me. I pray, knowing that He already knows everything about me, but aware that He wants to hear my voice speak of my concerns, my questions, my joys. I am comfortable that I have nothing I need to hide from Him. When it is time to get up from my chair to go on with the responsibilities of life, I am loathe to leave. Laying in David's arms or sitting in prayer with God—I find the two experiences remarkably similar.

Yet, like the bride in Solomon's poem, I recognize myself as just one lily in a field of lilies, nonunique and unimportant until the God of the universe picks me out and makes

me special. Yet the characters in *Song of Songs* include not only the bride and the bridegroom, but also their friends. They too, are encouraged to search for and love the Beloved. God loves me as if I am the only one, and yet at the same time I am part of the great chorus (a harem?) that loves Him too. We praise Him together, but He delights in each of us as His one and only. God can do what Solomon with his many wives could not: He can love every one of us with an incomparable intimacy and passion. His is a love so vast and complete that it can be showered over me in full abundance without slighting any of the other flowers around me. Though I am His and He is mine, that does not in any way diminish the fact that Miriam and Theresa and Martha and Lyssa are also loved by Him in the same deep, passionate way; nor does His love for them diminish my desire for Him. Could this be why Scripture points out that Solomon had 700 wives? Somehow in that, Solomon provides an image of the God who has billions of us, and yet, can individually love each of us with the devotion and intensity that the king loves the Shulammitte. Can we love Him back as fully as she who is “drunk with love” (Song of Songs, 5.1)?

God is not lonely. He is complete in Trinity, and yet what He wants from us is that we love Him. That is, after all, the greatest commandment—that we love God with all that we are—yet it is a commandment we are free to break. God offers us His love; we can accept it or reject it or treat it as a passing fancy—an occasional one-night stand. We can engage Him when it suits us and then go on with the rest of our business, or we can long for Him, desire Him. We can, like Solomon’s beloved bride, run through the streets and squares of our daily lives in search of the One our souls love. The thought of Him can excite us, draw us, energize us, empower us.

As I write these words I find myself breathless like the bride, excited and delighted, even exuberant at the thought of this glimpse of God, the Lover, and at the prospect of being seen and adored by Him. Some may find my sexual interpretation inappropriate, but is it really so odd to imagine that if I am loved, really loved, by One described as “the consuming fire” (Duet, 4.24) that the sexual intensity Solomon attempts to portray could, in fact, be merely a pale suggestion of what His holy love is really like? To be the object and recipient—the beloved—of the One whose very person defines love itself, implies a love beyond what even Solomon could envision.

This is a picture of the God who asks me to love Him voluntarily. Thus, like Solomon’s lover, my vineyard is mine to give or not to give? Could he take it? Of course—to suggest otherwise would be to beg the definition of “All powerful”—but He doesn’t. He chooses to wait and let me choose, because in that choice I find myself able to say with the bride, “I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” (Song of Songs, 6.3).

THE CHALICE

On the night before He died,
Jesus Christ took bread.
He gave it to them,
“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Then He took the cup of wine....
“Drink this, all of you.”

Yes, Lord, in remembrance of You.

Bread is broken; the Cup is lifted to heaven,
then passed into my waiting hands.

The King’s Cup, the Carpenter’s Cup—the Cup of my Lord,
“This is the Blood of Christ; the Cup of Salvation.”

Smooth silver, shimmering gold—heavy in my fingers.
Swirling liquid leaves a thick trace around the bowl:

“The Blood of Christ”...*The Blood of Christ.*

Many times, have I drunk from this Cup,
His Blood washing over me...through me,
Only a tiny sip, yet it drenches like a waterfall,

A cascade of flowing Grace

Lifting me into the arms
of my God, my Father...

Abba.

I’ve seen my earthly father bleed
as I drove him to the hospital
after the window pane shattered in his hands.

He warned me he might pass out.

The draining of his blood made him weak;
the flowing of Christ’s endows me with strength.

It is the Blood of Christ, poured out for me.

Now, I hold His Cup in my hand,
And gaze into its depths, maroon against gold,
swirling, iridescent in the light.

“The Blood of Christ,”

His Blood in my hands...

I brush a tear from my cheek.

“The Blood of Christ.” *The Cup of our Salvation.*

My brothers and sisters come to the rail.

Having freely received, I now freely give,

the Blood of Christ pouring from my fingertips.

“This is the Blood of Christ; take it and remember.”

I meet their eyes; they touch my heart.

Together, we are engulfed in wonder:

“The Blood of Christ,” grace flowing over us.

The service is over; I leave the sanctuary.

Stepping through the door into the sunshine,

I no longer hold His cup in my hand, but I strive

to continue passing His Grace

To everyone I meet,

for I hold in my heart

The Blood of Christ... The cup of my Lord.

AN INVITATION TO DINE

The invitation surprised me. I had picked up the mail and was casually thumbing through the envelopes: a water bill, an offer for a new credit card, an ad for the local Mexican restaurant, a card with a politician's smiling face asking for my vote, and hmm... what's this? A creamy envelope edged with gold foil announced, "An invitation to dine with the King."

It was probably just another restaurant ad, but I was intrigued. I broke the waxed seal and pulled out an elegant, printed card inviting me to, "A banquet with the King; 10:00 a.m., Sunday next; no RSVP necessary, just come as you are."

What could this be? And who schedules a banquet at 10:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning? Curiosity won out. Rather than throwing it into the nearby trash can, I decided to attend.

The day of the feast arrived. I admit I was a bit nervous; I'd never dined with a King before. Who was He anyway? King of what? I got dressed three times—no, that's too casual; noooo...that one is too flashy—it might draw too much attention. Finally, I settled on a simple black skirt and a royal blue blouse. I looked in the mirror. Right choice? I guess we'll find out.

Oh, was that a knock at the door?

Oh my! The chauffeur was like no one I'd ever seen before. He looked eight feet tall! His bronze skin gleamed and his eyes were brilliant, like the sun through stained glass. He was dressed in white with a gold belt. He did not speak, but bowed politely and motioned toward the...car? It was shaped like an enclosed horse-drawn carriage, except

there were no horses. Its sides showed a lattice work in pale, gold relief decorated with palm trees and pomegranates. The chauffeur opened the back door, and I carefully sat down on the carved wooden bench as my attention was drawn to the exquisite stained glass in the car windows. My driver slipped noiselessly behind the wheel. I'd hardly noticed that we had begun to move, when suddenly we were "there." Where, exactly, I wasn't sure, but we came to a smooth stop and the chauffeur got out and politely opened the door.

I slowly walked up the red carpet—surely this wasn't for me. A doorman who looked very much like the chauffeur, except that she was dressed in deep blue, with a similar gold belt, bowed and opened the enormous door. The floor inside looked like cut crystal. Should I walk on it? Could I? Another strikingly-tall young man offered me his arm and escorted me inside. I began to wish that I'd chosen the fancier dress. We walked down a long hall with walls paneled in cedar, then turned right to encounter another set of beautifully carved doors. They seemed to open by themselves. I peered inside.

It was nothing like I'd expected. The banquet room held none of the grandeur of the entry way. A long, low table stretched down the middle of the room, surrounded by large brown pillows. It wasn't adorned with carvings; it had no polished veneer; no table cloth covered its rough wooden surface; and no vases of flowers decorated its length. It looked like it might have been dragged out of someone's garage or a carpentry shop. Rather than fancy place settings, paper plates and plastic solo cups were scattered across it in no apparent order.

The ambiance also held none of the dignified reserve I'd expected people to adopt for a formal dinner with a King. Rather it was bright and festive—and a bit loud. The guests

seated on the pillows around the table chattered with their neighbors. They didn't seem to be dignitaries—just a gathering of an unusual assortment of regular people, but each was unique and intriguing. I looked up at my escort. He just smiled and gestured for me to go on inside. Still, I hesitated.

Some of the guests were quite old; others were twenty-somethings. A few children played tag in an open area on the far side of the table. Two very pretty blonds with long, straight hair sat together toward the near end of the table. They could have been twins, but were at least sisters. One wore a bright tie-dyed skirt and was figuring with mathematical symbols on a napkin. She seemed to be explaining something to the pony-tailed young man next to her. He shook his head insistently and picked up a mechanical pencil and napkin of his own. The other sister sat sipping her tea, quietly observing every detail of what went on around her. Though her features bore no hint of anything remotely Asian, she wore a pale pink Indian punjabi. She continued her silent observations until the handsome young man across the table very deliberately gained her attention and began asking her questions.

Not far down the table, a short, squat man in a tattered jacket with stringy grey hair and several missing teeth grinned through his unkempt beard. A multi-colored dog of indeterminate ancestry lay contentedly by his feet under the edge of the low table. The bearded guy called out loudly offering everyone who came near a handful of grapes or a drink of his wine. Next to him sat a well-dressed and perfectly-groomed executive who carried an air of power and confidence. The latest iPhone peeked out of his jacket pocket. The two couldn't have been more different, but the suited man leaned his head close to his neighbor and listened until they both chuckled at a shared joke.

A sage with a rounded forehead and a ring of white hair sat near the far end of the group. His face was wizened but animated with interest as he listened intently to the conversation from across the table. Affectionately, he took the hand of the stately woman who sat next to him. She had an expression of permanent amusement on her face. Leaning close, she murmured something in his ear. He let out a deep booming belly-laugh that seemed to reverberate off the high ceiling. I wanted to laugh with him.

My tall companion bent over and whispered that I should go on inside. I gingerly tiptoed down the three stairs into the hall, then paused again, still holding the hand railing.

A squarely-built gentleman in a skull cap spoke with a distinct Russian accent as he entered into discussion with the fine-featured middle-eastern man who sat next to him. The man had curly black hair and a neatly-trimmed beard. He held the hand of a quiet, dark-eyed girl on his other side. The Russian wore a cynical expression and their words seemed to grow heated, as if an argument was beginning. The girl closed her eyes, as if in prayer, as her boyfriend grew more adamant.

The debate caught the attention of a tall outdoorsman in black overalls and well-worn hiking boots who sat across the table. He gently sipped his wine and listened for a few minutes as their remarks grew louder. A huge, black Newfoundland that had been asleep behind his pillow woke. The dog sat up and pressed his head into the man's free hand, self-petting his own ears, until the man gave him a final pat, and sent the dog back to lay down. He addressed the men across the table, offering a few quiet words to each. Peace returned, and the girl smiled her thanks across the table.

A sophisticated man with a tight, sharp haircut and a colorful African tunic gestured widely as he described something big to the curly-haired young lady blacksmith next to him. Though she wasn't very tall, she was powerfully built and wore a many-pouched tool belt around her waist. He accidentally knocked over his plastic cup and, for a moment, looked sheepish. Then they both giggled, and she helped him mop up the mess.

Even as they all chattered and laughed among themselves, the attention of the guests was often drawn back toward the head of the table. I looked too, and then I noticed...the Host.

He reclined comfortably at the far end of the table. He, too, was dressed simply—just a white robe with a rope for a belt—but there was something captivating about Him. I couldn't take my eyes from His face. His skin was the color of sun tea with the light shining through it, similar in tone to the chauffeur and the doorman, but much deeper. His mouth was open in a great smile. His eyes seemed to glow with intensity, until he began to laugh—a joyous, infectious laugh—then his eyes turned to twinkling. He seemed to be enjoying his guests immensely.

I couldn't just stand here forever. Trying to be inconspicuous, I inched my way toward an empty pillow at the end of the table nearest the door and began to kneel, but I guess I wasn't discreet enough. The Host, who I later learned was, indeed, the King, caught sight of me.

“Come in! Come in!” He called. “No, no. Not down there. Come up here where I can look at you. This is the first time you've joined us for one of our little brouhahas. I'm so glad you've finally come.”

Finally come? Was I late? Was I supposed to have come sometime before?

Shyly, I shuffled toward the head of the table. The guests continued to converse; I heard many languages as I walked along the crowd. I could identify Chinese and French and Slovakian, though I couldn't understand what was being said. I caught a few phrases in Spanish and recognized a Russian proverb being passed between a thin woman and a boy of about ten.

An empty cushion lay on the floor next to the King. He motioned for me to sit down. I was self-conscious; everyone had seen Him call me forward. What should I do? I had no idea what the etiquette was here. I carefully sat down, tucked my feet under my skirt, and smoothed it around me. Then I looked up cautiously, but no one seemed to expect anything special from me. They continued to chatter together, or with the King. Some drank white wine from their plastic cups and nibbled grapes and cheese from plates that were haphazardly scattered down the center of the table. Others seemed to have glasses of milk and were eating thick slices of brown, grainy bread spread generously with honey. The King smiled at me, but then purposefully turned His attention to someone else, graciously giving me time to gain composure and become more comfortable. A woman wearing a bright yellow and red shirt and a Green Bay Packer's hat gave me a welcoming finger-wave from down the table. Sitting next to her was a very elderly couple. The old woman, who probably used to be much taller than she now appeared, smiled at me knowingly, not only with her mouth, but also through her faded blue eyes.

I looked around the room. The floor-to-very-tall-ceiling bookshelves that surrounded us seemed to stretch into the distance so that I couldn't quite tell where they

ended. Tightly-packed volumes inside all sorts of bindings lined the shelves or lay in jumbled stacks on the floor. Armchairs with lamps were tucked here and there. The room could as easily have been a library as a banquet hall. It looked as if the sum-total of human wisdom was enshrined here. The King caught me looking at the books and smiled faintly. Somehow, I felt sure he'd read them all—or maybe he'd written them.

He motioned to the two women across the table from me and introduced us, though I didn't quite catch their names. One was a white woman with an intense gaze but a soft southern accent. The black woman next to her flipped the fringe from her colorful head scarf over her shoulder and stood up, coming around the table to give me a hug. "Sister, I'm glad you're here," she said enthusiastically. We exchanged a few words before she went back to sit down.

I looked up and noticed the ceiling which was papered with posters—playbills advertising an array of movies and stage productions in every language imaginable. I recognized Charlton Heston as Moses and Denzel Washington from "The Book of Eli." I saw an announcement of a British production of "The Merchant of Venice" and a Chinese play, apparently about a young man and a hawk. It was a colorful myriad of human drama depicting comedy and history and tragedy from all over the world.

The banquet hall was bigger than I had first realized. Were there 50 people around the table? Or a hundred? Or maybe two hundred? More? They seemed strangely uncountable—a multitude that didn't fade into being a crowd, but in which every face retained its distinct personality. The King seemed able to give attention to each one, and yet not ignore anyone else. A young couple cuddled close together down the table from

me. All of their attention seemed to be on each other, until the girl teasingly put a grape in the young man's mouth. They both melted into giggles when the King winked at them.

I was not the only latecomer. A tall, thin black man escorted his wife to a place in the center of the table. He carefully arranged a pillow for her and helped her remove her creamy, wool coat before taking his place by her side. Casually draping his arm across her shoulders, he introduced her proudly as the doctor in the family. She smiled as he quickly got caught up in a discussion with the professor across the table, declaring vigorously that education is impossible without introspection.

Behind them a broad-shouldered young man descended the steps, leaning on his cane and placing his feet very deliberately. He walked with a pronounced limp and seemed a little unsure, as if he could barely see where he was going. He found his way to the pillow I had tried to sit on at first and sat down awkwardly, picking up his dangling left hand with his right one and carefully laying it in his lap. Once settled, he dived into the conversation, opening with a joke that made everyone around him laugh.

The two young people whose napkins were now completely inundated with mathematical formulas raised their voices. She insisted that using multi-dimensional vectors, she could draw an accurate model of the whole world system. He disagreed, arguing that the world couldn't be reduced to numbers. The man whose laughter had shaken the rafters called down the table, adding a new facet to their debate. He told them that, as with musical notes, the real character of the world lay in the space between the numbers. The King interrupted briefly to tell them they were all right, and that the numbers and the space between them were, in fact, one and the same.

This fellowship went on for some time, until a group of people dressed much like the chauffeur and the door keeper, except that their tunics were purple with gold belts, came in carrying a loaf of bread and a bottle of a new kind of wine. These were placed before the King, Who reached out to lay His hand across the top of the bread. He was joined by two new Persons. Looking at them, I had no doubt that they were family. By Himself, the King had been One to admire—a perfect blending of majesty and familiarity, of the intimate and the extraordinary. Together, these three were completely indescribable, their excellence beyond my words. They stood separately, yet seemed to move in concert. It was as if each knew the thoughts of the others the instant they formed...or perhaps they thought with one Mind.

Gradually, the room grew respectfully silent. The children returned from their game to sit down with their parents. The King met the eyes of One of the Others and smiled. He picked up the loaf of bread and carefully tore it into small fragments. Lifting the platter of bite-sized pieces high, He said with a great smile, “Take, eat, and be blessed!” A cheer rose from the crowd, and He passed the platter down the table. The jovial sage continued to smile, but reverently laid his hand on the King’s table and closed his eyes before taking a morsel of bread and passing the platter on. Everyone took a piece, joyfully sharing it as they participated in His grand banquet.

The King picked up a silver cup that I hadn’t noticed before. It was old and somewhat battered—no longer fully round—yet it appeared priceless, reflecting the light that glowed from the faces of the Trio. The King poured wine from the new bottle into the cup. It was a thick, dark burgundy. He lifted the cup toward the ceiling. “Drink this in

grateful remembrance, for you, my children, were dead and now you are alive again; you were lost and now you're found." The cheering was even louder this time. Finally, I understood. This wasn't the King of a country or an empire. He was Sovereign over all that is, not only Master of this table, but of all tables. Yet even more astonishing, this was my King...and my Father.

The King's Son reached out a deeply scarred hand and took the cup from His Father. As I watched, He lovingly started down the opposite side of the table, offering a sip of the rich, red wine to each person he came to. It must have taken a long time for Him to greet everyone on that side of the table and then to come back down my side, but it didn't seem long at all. With each person, he stopped, looked into their eyes and smiled, as if they were the only one in the room. Some looked self-consciously at their feet, then raised their eyes to meet His with a look of wonder and joy. Others reached out to gently touch His Face. A few threw caution to the wind, wrapping their arms around Him in an elated hug, and He laughed with them.

At last, He came to me. I had been excited with anticipation as I'd watched him come nearer and nearer down the table, but as He finished with the person before me, I suddenly began to remember...the mess I'd selfishly left for my husband to clean up; my pride in getting my project accepted over my colleague's; the harsh words I'd had for my daughter; the trip to Europe I had been coveting and scheming to finance; the smoldering anger I'd nurtured against my sister. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I belonged here. Could I face Him? I looked at the floor.

He waited patiently for a moment. Then He put a gentle finger under my chin and lifted my face toward His. He looked into my eyes. No, He looked into my soul. Suddenly I knew that He knew all about those things, and they were all forgiven. He smiled. I knelt, looking at Him in awe. He offered me a sip of wine; it was sweet, and I could feel its burn as it flowed over my tongue and down my throat, washing away all that had gone before.

The joy in the room overflowed. People abandoned their places at the table and began stirring around the hall, chatting in excited groups of threes and fives. The King moved easily in and out of these circles adding his comments to one conversation here and another over there. I noticed that some people were sipping from mugs of coffee and wondered aloud where the coffee had come from. The teenager standing next to me pointed out several urns on a serving table across the room.

“I’ll get you a cup,” she offered. She navigated through the crowd and returned with a steaming mug of the best coffee I’d ever tasted, along with a molasses cookie. Someone pulled out an old fiddle and began to play it. Instantly, a bongo drum and a guitar appeared out of nowhere, and the dancing began. The King looked on in merriment as he watched his guests swing and twirl and waltz and bounce and hip-hop all over the room.

The celebration continued for quite a while longer—I’ve no idea how long—and then it was time to return home. I was still a little bit shy as I stepped up to shake the King’s hand and thank Him for inviting me, but He caught me up in a hug instead and insisted that I should come back again very soon. I hardly noticed the crystal floors or the gold chariot on the way out. They no longer impressed me. I’d been inside. I’d been to the banquet.

Arriving home, I found everything as I had left it, yet nothing was the same. The newspaper and yesterday's mail lay on the table; the mess was still in the kitchen (I was glad my husband hadn't cleaned it up); the dresses I'd discarded in my puzzled dressing that morning still lay strewn across the bed. Life would go on, picking up from where I'd left off. Monday morning would come, and I would go back to work as usual. But that was no longer what mattered—I was His. I am His.

APPENDIX: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

A. Theme

The conversation into which my thesis work attempts to contribute reaches into antiquity. It was begun by ancients who we can neither name nor identify who wondered about the relationship between God (or gods) and man. Indeed, the inquiry into the natures of both God and man have been primary questions in the continuing discussions of philosophy, theology, literature, history and even the sciences for thousands of years. Aristotle attempted to capture many of the problems that inhabit these inquiries under a single umbrella in the writing of his *Metaphysics*.

What, exactly, is metaphysics? As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes, it is not easy to define: “Ancient and Medieval philosophers might have said that metaphysics was, like chemistry or astrology, to be defined by its subject-matter: metaphysics was the ‘science’ that studied ‘being as such’ or ‘the first causes of things’ or ‘things that do not change’” (van Inwagen and Sullivan). Such a definition no longer fully encompasses the topic of metaphysics, but these perennial questions about the nature of God, the nature of man, and the relationship between the two have continued to perplex thinkers in a variety of fields.

In *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously struggled with a similar dilemma: that of the paradox between the transcendent and the intimate God. He writes, “And how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord, since when I call for Him, I shall be calling Him to myself? and what room is there within me, wither my God can come into me? Whither

can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? Is there, indeed, O Lord my God, aught in me that can contain Thee?" (Augustine)

Because my thesis is written from a Christian perspective and for a Christian audience and addresses specifically the nature of the Christian God, I will limit my discussion of this conversation to a Christian viewpoint and leave both the more ancient and the broader discussions of these topics beyond the scope of this writing. In order to place my thesis within the context of this dialogue over time, it is necessary to consider not one conversation, but three intertwined exchanges: the conversation between God and myself (and other selves); the conversation between my writings and their intended readers; and the broader conversation that has played out among Christian thinkers and devotional writers over the past 2000 years.

B. A Multi-Genre Approach

It seems that modern literary study is often separated into many tightly-defined specialties along several dividing lines. A piece of literary writing maybe classified as African, American, or Asian; as Medieval, Early Modern, or Twentieth Century; or as poetry, fiction, nonfiction, or criticism. It is my hoped to cross these distinctions and draw from and contribute to a broad exploration of literary expression into human experience, condition, and potential in light of the transcendent and intimate God. The inspiration for such a multi-genre exploration stemmed from reading the works of modern devotional writer, Dr. James A. Campbell (*The Holiness of Water* [Campbell 1-77]; *Christmas Stories and The Christmas Story* [Campbell 7-45]; *Communion: Liturgies for the Living of These*

Days [Campbell 1-122]). In each of his books, he explores a particular theme and theology using a variety of literary approaches. I hope that I have succeeded in surveying the many facets of my topic using many genres and approaches as creatively as Dr. Campbell explored Advent.

Another example of this kind of multi-genre investigation of a topic occurs in *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*, by Iraqi poet, Dunya Mikhail. She also uses a variety of genres, including interviews, commentary, poetry, journalism, personal memoir, and photography to portray the many aspects of pain suffered by the people of northern Iraq in the wake of the Islamic State's invasion (Mikhail and Winslow).

Many modern literary magazines also use this form, coming out each month or quarter with an issue that focuses on a specific theme expressed through varied offerings of poetry, prose, essays, and experimental genres. While many of these are not so tightly themed as my thesis work, they do form multi-genre explorations of broad topics, not written by a single author, but chosen out of the preferences and interests of individual editors or teams of editors.

The genre of devotional literature includes works of deep thought and inquisitive theology as well as disciplines for the temporal living out of these concepts. From the introspective honesty of Augustine's *Confessions* to Thomas a Kempis' conversations with Jesus in *The Imitation of Christ*; from the intense visions recounted by *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, to the "subterranean sanctuary of the soul" in Thomas Kelly's *Testament of Devotion*, and C.S. Lewis' prolific gift for observing everyday life and seeing

God acting within it, devotional literature traditionally seeks to ask hard questions and take the reader deeper.

This genre provides a bridge between serious theological scholarship and the light, “daily-reading” approach of what are sometimes called “inspirational” books. Unfortunately, in modern writing, the genre of devotional literature has leaned toward light commentary and cliched language and away from searching for deep new approaches, fresh facets, and innovative ways of understanding age-old theological concepts. In the introduction to *Devotional Classics*, Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith write:

For many people today devotional means ethereal, otherworldly, irrelevant. To still others it implies sentimentality, superficiality, and an unwillingness to face the hard realities of life. In point of fact, however, genuine devotional writings have nothing to do with these modern misconceptions. Rather, they seek to touch the heart, to address the will, to mold the mind. They call for radical character formation. They instill holy habits (Foster, Richard J., Smith, James Br).

My own working definition of devotional literature looks deeply into the theological mysteries and philosophical quandaries that have puzzled mortals for millennia, to discover the inspiration of the Divine, and then to apply that inspiration to living a life of both intellectual integrity and faith.

I know, of course, that my own attempts at literary and poetic styles come out of traditions and previous literary conventions that developed over time until I have seen and read them in the works of various authors, both old and modern. Often, I don't really know where the styles which reside in my mind have come from, and I found it fun to go looking for previous works whose echoes I could recognize in my own writing: Robert Herrick's “To God” reminded me of my own piece “Before the King;” the shaped poem, “The Altar” by George Herbert predicated my attempts at playing with the way my poems look on the

page; the communion image in Herbert's "Love (III)" feels similar to my communion in "An Invitation to Dine;" Petrarch analogizes the climbing of a mountain with a sacred journey in "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux;" and T.S. Eliot describes a spiritual ascent in the third segment of "Ash Wednesday."

In the following segments, I will address the provenance of various pieces in my thesis work and attempt place them within the overall historical conversation of devotional literature. These will not be comprehensive literature reviews, as such would be a daunting task with 11 individual pieces over more than 3000 years of sacred writing. Rather they will focus on the specific writings that helped to inspire or which undergird each story, essay, or poem.

C. Trip Report: August, 2017

What we modern climbers now refer to as a "trip report" and often post online after a summit attempt on forums like 14ers.com, serves as a record of our adventures and justification for bragging rights, as well as a guide for those who will climb the same trails after us. Preparation for a climb usually includes reading recent trip reports from other hikers to get an advance look at the terrain and a feel for current conditions. However, we who climb with modern REI gear, GPS tracking, and internet reporting capabilities are far from the first to produce trip reports, nor am I the first to see the mountain I was climbing as a spiritual metaphor and to include in my trip report not only the details of the physical climb, but also of the spiritual one. Fourteenth century Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch was responsible for one such ancient trip report. In "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux" he recounted

the details of his climb, including sitting down to read from the copy of Augustine's *Confessions* that he had carried with him. Spurred by Augustine, he then analogized the climb with his own spiritual difficulties and misgivings about the vanity of human life.

Dante's *Purgatory* is also a metaphorical mountain climb. Whereas *Inferno* is a spiraling down through the circles of hell, *Purgatory* is a wandering, switch-backing, ledge-running, saddle-searching heights-scaling hike from earth toward the entrance to heaven. Dante portrays the climb as an arduous physical work of leaving one's former sinfulness behind and striving toward paradise (Alighieri). In a more recent work, TS Eliot's "Ash Wednesday (3)" includes a climbing of the stairs that also seems reminiscent of a symbolic spiritual climb (Hopler and Johnson 285).

One additional characteristic of my "Trip Report" is that God speaks. The voice of God is not new to devotional literature. Of course, Biblical accounts of God's voice abound. Since then many others have reported His words. Among these are Julian of Norwich, who hears the words of Christ throughout *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (Crampton 37-155) and Thomas a Kempis, who heads whole sections in *The Imitation of Christ* with the attribution: "The Voice of Christ." This "Voice" asks the reader to "strive diligently" toward a range of spiritual goals, but does so in a very gentle tone, opening most of his sections with the address, "My child" (a Kempis).

D. Abba and In the Playroom

I will address the literary underpinnings of "Abba" and "In the Playroom" together, since their themes are very similar, though their forms are different. The interplay between

God, the Master of All, and God, my Father, Confidant and Friend, has long been a subject for writers. *Psalm* 8 addresses God saying, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens” (*Ps*, 8.1) and goes on to wonder about our significance in comparison to Him: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (*Ps* 8.3-4). In contrast, *Psalm* 139 recognizes the intimate closeness of God, saying, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (*Ps* 139.1-4). Jesus, Himself, spoke at times of the transcendent King of Heaven and Earth and at other times of the joyously dancing Father of the prodigal.

Christian literature and experience are complicated by this paradox, with Christian writers continually shifting back and forth between these two characterizations of God. Ben Jonson’s poem, “A Hymn to God the Father,” focuses on the demands of the universal God (Pollock and Pollock 89), and Anne Bronte approaches God the King in “Ever Round His Throne” (Pollock and Pollock 15). Alfred Lord Tennyson takes a much more intimate view writing, “Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet” (Pollock and Pollock 149); and Emily Dickenson constantly goes looking for the Divine and finds her closest friend: “God grows above—so those who pray/Horizons—must ascend/And so I stepped upon the North/To see this Curious Friend” (Hopler and Johnson 256). Thomas More’s “Tender Loving Father” acknowledges both aspects: “Alone into

his Lord's high presence/He may thee find, O well of indulgence,/In thy lordship not as lord, but rather /As a very tender, loving father" (Pollock and Pollock 112). In a more recent context, Rob Bell's "Breathe" recognizes the God who was so lofty that the ancient Jews refused to pronounce His name and the "pneuma" or Spirit who resides in our very breath (Bell). My own work attempts to not only explore both of these aspects of God's character, but to weave them together in a way that they are not only seen side-by-side, but felt deeply and simultaneously. I want to establish not just a dichotomy, but a circle: the King is the Father is the King.

Although it is common for modern Christian writers to translate "Abba" as "Daddy," the Hebrew word was simply a reference to a father, both in formal (O Father) and informal (my father) contexts (Stanton). Jesus addresses God using "Abba" in *Mark* (*Mark*, 14.6) and Paul echoes this use in *Romans* (*Ro*, 8.15) and *Galatians* (*Gal*, 4.6). Thus, my use of the word as the title of my poem touches on both aspects, allowing the poem to pass through the transcendent to the comfortable. Similarly, "In the Playroom" acknowledges the God who created the universe and focuses on the more intimate father relationship.

In modern contexts, the father metaphor is admittedly fraught with complications, since the experience of the child/father relationship varies from reader to reader, extending from loving support to abuse. Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy" provides a near-opposite use of the metaphor to the one used in my own poem. Instead of talking about a heavenly father and comparing him to an earthly father, as I do in "Abba," Plath writes of her natural father and compares him to a god. Her comparison, however, carries none of the

supportive, loving connotations of “Abba,” but rather uses the metaphor to describe an abusive and violent relationship, punctuated by Nazi images. In the end, while the child in my poem runs toward the Father, Plath severs ties with hers (Sylvia Plath). I chose to use this metaphor as a reference to an ideal, focusing on what a father/child relationship can be in its best iteration.

E. A Game of Chess

The use of chess in contemporary writing serves as a reminder for modern audiences of the power of the game as a shared meditation rather than just as computerized sport. More than other games, which involve chance to greater and lesser degrees, chess is a complicated competition where the skill of the chess master determines the outcome of the game. Yet, that skill is not only a matter of playing wisely in the moment, but of seeing many moves beyond and anticipating the eventual consequences of each action. This makes it an exceptionally appropriate metaphor for God, particularly in the context of the central question in my thesis and of the classic questions surrounding free will throughout Christian writings.

This picture of the chess master in full control of the board begs a metaphorical adjustment to account for not only the skill of the Master, but also the freewill of the pieces. Here again, chess provides a remarkably appropriate analogy since, unlike many other games, it allows for each piece to move in a unique way, inherent in its own identity, but still under the guiding eye of the master. Thus, within the metaphor, this poem reaches back to every other use of chess as an analogy for God, but outside the metaphor, it extends

from the same theological arguments for free will that divided Martin Luther from John Calvin and prompted Luther's writing of *On Christian Liberty* (Luther).

While my poem puts a positive spin on the relationship between the Player and the pieces, in literature, this relationship has not always been optimistic. One example is the poem, "Chess" by 20th century Argentine author and poet, Jorge Luis Borges which, like my poem, refers to the hand of the master and the specific movements of the pieces. Its message, however, is much darker, opening by defining the black and white of the board as representative of "two colors that hate each other" and going on to compare the chess game to international war and political intrigue. The pieces in his poem are not aided by the hand of the player, but manipulated against their knowledge and will ("Jorge Luis Borges"). My favorite use of this metaphor (and probably the one that stimulated this poem from somewhere in the back of my mind—though I encountered it many years ago) comes from a film version of "The Man of La Mancha" starring Peter O'Toole and Sophia Loren in which the pieces are portrayed by real people and a story is told through the movement of the chessmen.

F. The Augustinian Ant

The Augustinian Ant was conceived in response to reading Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* (Anselm 82-104). I was fascinated to note that, while his attempt to prove God using a logical syllogism falls apart because the premises from which he draws his conclusion are themselves unprovable, within the text of *Proslogion* I found a much more persuasive proof—Anselm often interrupts his own logical lines of reasoning to praise this

God he is attempting to prove is there at all. In those outpourings of emotional faith, we find not a proof, but an eye-witness; he attests to the God he, himself, knows, even if his awkward attempts to prove Him to others is unsuccessful.

This led me to go looking for other thinkers and theologians in addition to Anselm who had tried to prove God. We could argue that Aristotle started these attempts, but in fact he just sort of assumed that the existence of the world required a Prime Mover—he needed a First Thinker to think the first thought (Kaplan 143-147). Augustine went through a 120 page dialogue against Evodius in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, in which he used a long series of syllogisms and logical lines of reasoning to get Evodius to agree that if Augustine could prove that something (x) exists which was superior to human reason, and that nothing else exists that is superior to x, that thing that was superior to human reason must be God. This included the assumption that, since human reason is both sentient and intelligent, anything superior to it would also necessarily be a Being (Augustine).

Thomas Aquinas didn't believe that our minds are sufficient for us to know God directly, but that we must know Him through his effects on the world around us. In *Summa Theologica* Aquinas offered his "Five Ways"—five effects-proofs that God exists (Aquinas). In *Pensees*, Pascal resorted to an odds-based argument, often referred to as "Pascal's Wager." He argued that if God does not exist, then nothing is lost by our belief in a fictional conception; however, if God does exist, unbelief is a dangerous matter. Rather than directly trying to prove God, Pascal suggested that he might be accepted as the safest and most beneficial course (Pascal 149-153). Finally, (though not really "finally" at all, as the argument over whether or not God may be definitively proven or disproven continues

into today) William Paley argued that if we went for a walk in the woods and found a watch, due to its complexity and accuracy, we would have to assume that the watch did not just appear, nor did it make itself, but that somewhere, there was a watchmaker (Anonymous).

In each of these cases, I found the same pattern: unpersuasive logical attempts that turned a variety of linguistic and logical back handsprings in an attempt to prove the Deity of God, but in the end failed to do so. In the midst of those attempts, however, each provided extraordinary expressions of their own faith in a God they didn't need to have proven to them. The power of their own experience far outweighed any attempt at logical proof. Out of this exploration, the Augustinian Ant was born.

G. Naked and Unashamed and Before the King

Again, I will discuss “Naked and Unashamed” and “Before the King” together. The idea of coming before the throne of God is common in Christian and Jewish writings, both Biblical and extra-Biblical. The image of Esther going unbidden before King Ahasuerus (*Esther* 5.1-3) forms the basis for this image in my own mind, which led to the writing of both of these pieces. Anne Brontë's “Ever Round the Throne” (Pollock and Pollock 15) and George Herbert's “The Altar” (Hopler and Johnson 159) echo this image as well.

The concept of coming before God naked and being dressed by Him also dates to long before Christ. *Isaiah* and *Ezekiel*, among other Old Testament prophets occasionally made their points about Israel's disobedience and spiritual nakedness by preaching naked (English Standard Version). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton echoed the Genesis account but

focused extensively on the unashamed nakedness of Adam and Eve in their original state and on their subsequent shame in finding themselves fallen and naked (Milton). In the end, they are physically and symbolically dressed by God in animal skins. I was a little surprised to find nakedness becoming a theme as I worked on my thesis pieces, but the symbolism that links being naked with being poor in Spirit is not unusual.

H. The Song of a Lonely King

The metaphor of the bride and the bridegroom appears in many places throughout scriptural writing but is given its strongest characterization in *The Song of Songs*, generally attributed to King Solomon. This book has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways by both Jewish and Christian commentators over the past 3000 years. In writing this piece, I read excerpts from a number of them, including: John of the Cross, Gregory the Great, Alcuin of York, Hugh of Saint Victor, William of Saint Thierry, Alan of Lille, Thomas of Perseigne, Thomas Gallus, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, and Nicholas of Lyra (Turner). These Biblical scholars and apologists have interpreted the work in many ways and with many more subtle shades of interpretation between the separate explanations. Some have seen it as literal, accepting its sensuous nature; some as merely artistic—a collection of love poems. Others view it as a parable representing variously God and the Jews, Christ and the Church, God and Mary, and Christ and the individual believer.

With so many interpretations, it's hard to determine what *Song of Songs* may mean. Paul Tanner refers to a statement by medieval Jewish commentator Saadia, suggesting that “the Song of Songs is like a book for which the key has been lost” (Tanner). I wonder if

perhaps the opposite is true: it is a book with too many keys, and we continue to shuffle through them looking for the one that truly fits the ancient lock. My piece on Solomon and the *Song of Songs* does little to resolve the rattling of these keys. Instead, it just forges one more possible key to add to the already heavily-laden fob.

The idea of using an idealized woman (whether real or imaginary or an over-romanticized combination of both) to motivate and alter a character even though she is present only in the character's mind is not an unusual literary device. Examples would include both Dante's Beatrice and Cervante's Dulcinea. Although I could find no other interpreters of *Song of Songs* who viewed her as an imaginary ideal, the possibility that Solomon's Shulammitte bride could have been a similarly distant, but emotionally impactful character did not seem to be too much of a stretch.

One more note on the writing style in "The Song of a Lonely King:" I have chosen to weave scriptural lines from Solomon's poem into the text of my piece without quote marks or citation parentheses. John Bunyan and Thomas a Kempis are well-known for this type of Biblical usage, and Dante also uses Scriptural lines liberally in his text and in the conversations of his characters. As in these classical works, a reader who is not familiar with the Biblical passages could miss the allusions in "The Song of a Lonely King," but they will be obvious to anyone familiar with *Song of Songs*.

While throughout this writing, my goal is not to get bogged down in arguments over various points of theology, "The Song of a Lonely King" does reveal my position in the debate between Luther and Calvin and their respective successors over predestination or free will. Many Christians do, however, claim the middle ground on this debate,

claiming that while we are free to choose for or against God, His foreknowledge of what choice we will make constructs a circumstance that looks much like predestination. Milton hints at this idea when the God of Paradise Lost sees satan coming into his newly-created world and predicts the outcome of his temptations. God left Adam and Eve free to choose, but knows in advance what decision they will make (Milton 81).

I. The Chalice and An Invitation to Dine

The Literary parent of “The Chalice” is really the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, first published in 1549 under the primary authorship of Thomas Cranmer and updated many times since; the 1979 Book of Common Prayer is still in use (Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica). I know its pages so well that I no longer need to open the book to say the mass. Many of the lines in “The Chalice” flow directly from words of the eucharist service in the prayer book, and the experience of serving the communion cup was the inspiration for the poem. It explores the relationship between God the father and my earthly father using the context of the Eucharist.

Similarly, “An Invitation to Dine” plays with the image of the King in conjunction with the eucharist, but I wanted to take it out of the sober, serious tone that usually surrounds the mass and make that King a more relatable Father and Host, a joyful, laughing God. Some years ago, a film called “Matthew” was widely characterized as being about a “laughing Jesus.” In writing “An Invitation to Dine,” I had a similar goal.

I also wanted to portray as a grand host. George Herbert penned a similar idea in “Love (III).” He begins the poem, “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, /

Guiltie of dust and sinne./ But quick-eye'd Love, observing me grow slack/ From my first entrance in,/ Drew near to me, sweetly questioning,/ If I lack'd any thing." (Hopler and Johnson 164-165). After exploring the idea of being God's guest, Herbert concludes, "You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:/So I did sit and eat" (Hopler and Johnson 1-415).

The origin of the characters in "An Invitation to Dine" also bears mentioning. Dante's trail through hell and purgatory is littered with post-human cairns who point the way to the next ridge, turn, or resting place. Often, these helpful shades were real people whom Dante had known or known of. He borrowed their traits and their histories, providing both good and bad examples (checks and goads) to illustrate his vices. The most obvious use of a real person is his choice of Virgil as his guide. C.S. Lewis uses a similar device in *The Great Divorce* when his character encounters and is advised by Lewis' own literary hero, George MacDonald (Lewis). On this side of the Atlantic, Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology" and Melvin B. Tolson's "Gallery of Harlem Portraits" make similar use of real people to create unique literary characters (Tolson and Farnsworth).

I also wanted to populate this story with real characters, thus, though no names are used in the piece, each of the many guests sitting around the table in the story has a real name. Since most of them are not famous, however, they add little in the way of allusion for the reader. Rather they provide a few inside jokes or honorariums to those who have influenced and directed my own path.

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