

edited by Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal
foreword by Frank Schaeffer

EMPTY THE PEWS

stories of leaving the church



For those who have left the fold

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FOREWORD

FRANK SCHAEFFER

There is a great exodus taking place in Christian circles. Can it be called a loss of faith? I don't think so. It is rather a loss of confidence in everything at once. Christianity has always been about "the Word," but these days, words don't seem to matter. They've lost their power to describe and convince in the face of horrible deeds, from climate-change denial to the persecution of trans people to the wholesale abandonment of Christ's teachings in favor of abusive meanness. The hard-right white evangelical voter gave us Trump. The church sat silent as industrial oligarchs ruined the earth.

Christianity is improbable. When its cultural presence fades, be that through the Roman Catholic sex-abuse meltdown or because of the Trumping of white evangelicalism, all that's left is disillusionment. Presuppositional theology – the sort of "apologetics" my late father Francis Schaeffer dealt in – only works if you accept the possibility that some of "this" (i.e., the entire claim of "historical" Christianity) might be true. Fewer and fewer people do these days, outside of the initiated and indoctrinated. The grim "witness" of how Christians have behaved and voted is too heavy a blow for faith in magical thinking to survive.

This anthology marks a historic moment as a group of younger writers and scholars have come together to record what is happening (and has happened) to their inner lives of faith. What ties these essays together is one idea: history needs record keepers. Bluntly: as the aging, Fox News-loving "alternative facts" crowd dies out, what's left? These writers and the millions they represent is one answer.

There are some big differences between these contributors and

me. They represent a generational shift. Most, though not all, are Gen Xers and Millennials to whom I'm the "old guy." And none of them had anything like my kind of nepotistic celebrity within evangelicaldom. That said, I find solidarity herein, the solidarity of survivors.

Many people who grew up in evangelical homes will understand me when I say that remembering my own evangelical upbringing seems like an odd and bad dream. Throughout my early childhood, we Schaeffers were busy littering train seats, café tables, and assorted telephone booths all over Europe with luridly illustrated little pamphlets "in the local language, in case someone is led to read it," as Dad said. They had titles such as "What Must I Do to Be Saved?" and "Is There a Heaven and Hell?" and "Where Will I Spend Eternity?" Sometimes, as our train roared through Italian or Swiss towns, Dad would fling handfuls of tracts from the window at astonished passersby. The lesson I learned from all this was that there was "us" (the saved) and "them" (the lost). This set in motion the us-and-them way of thinking that, transposed decades later to politics, cast Democrats as "the lost," deserving of hell, and we Republicans as saved and favored by God—no matter how far our actions strayed from anything remotely Christlike.

How do you unscramble this level of broken-brain toxicity? To read this book is one good answer. The writers here are exposing the Christian right as a toxic farce. Since I was for a time a leader in that netherworld, and since I've been a bit of a pioneer in speaking out about leaving it, I welcome this book of essays. It heralds the arrival of the next wave of questioners I helped unleash by asking some questions of myself through my novels, nonfiction books, and media appearances.

A large part of what this book does is capture a generational exodus from toxic Christianity from the perspective of (for the most part) former believers. What is the usefulness of these essays? They are a record of dissent! They are a record of heartbreak! They are a record of hope based on lives lived, not unattainable magical fixes! They are also a therapeutic reaching out to those (like me) whose neural pathways have been damaged by what has to be called nurtured insanity.

During a different period of religious madness, in seventeenth-

century Massachusetts, Anne Hutchinson was an “unauthorized” Bible teacher in a dissident church group who, in the words of the Boston monument honoring her, was a “courageous exponent of civil liberty and religious toleration.” She was also a student of the Bible, which she interpreted by the light of what she termed her own “divine inspiration.” In other words, like the writers in this book, she came to believe that in order to remain a sane and decent being, she had to pick and choose what she believed from her tradition. Let’s hope a better fate awaits these essayists – Hutchinson was banished from the colony for her stand.

Hutchinson seems to have concluded that religious believers should worship God, not the books *about* God. Another way to state her case is that God does not reveal himself, herself, or themselves through books but rather through what she called the “prophetical office” of the heart, like that which is revealed in these essays.

Our hearts connect to a truth larger than ourselves: love of others in the context of community. That is the value of this anthology’s written windows into lovely souls changing before our eyes. They provide the place and time for the inner liturgies through which we may unite with these writers heart-to-heart, in order to seek out those truths that even our best words cannot describe.

CONTRIBUTORS

Garrard Conley is the author of the *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Boy Erased*, which has been translated into over a dozen languages and is now a major motion picture. He is also a creator and producer of the podcast *UnErased*, which explores the history of conversion therapy in America through interviews, historical documents, and archival materials provided by the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC. His work can be found in the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Vice*, *CNN*, *BuzzFeed*, *Them*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the *Huffington Post*, among other places. Conley lives in New York City with his husband, and is currently at work on a novel about queer eighteenth-century lives. He can be found online at @gayrodcon and garrardconley.com.

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Lyz Lenz is the author of *God Land: A Story of Faith, Loss, and Renewal in Middle America* and the forthcoming *Belabored: Tales of Myth, Medicine, and Motherhood*. She has been published in many places, including the *New York Times*, *BuzzFeed*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and the anthology *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, edited by Roxane Gay. Lenz holds an MFA in creative writing from Lesley University and is a contributing writer to the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

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Carmen Maria Machado's debut short story collection, *Her Body and*

Other Parties, was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Kirkus Prize, LA Times Book Prize Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, the World Fantasy Award, the Dylan Thomas Prize, and the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction, and the winner of the Bard Fiction Prize, the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize. In 2018, the *New York Times* listed *Her Body and Other Parties* as a member of "The New Vanguard," one of "15 remarkable books by women that are shaping the way we read and write fiction in the 21st century." Her essays, fiction, and criticism have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *VQR*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, the *Believer*, *Guernica*, *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the Michener-Copernicus Foundation, the Elizabeth George Foundation, the CINTAS Foundation, Yaddo, Hedgebrook, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. She is the writer in residence at the University of Pennsylvania and lives in Philadelphia with her wife.

Isaac Marion grew up in small towns around the Pacific Northwest, pursuing careers in writing, painting, and music throughout his youth until the publication of his debut novel in 2010. *Warm Bodies* became a *New York Times* best seller, inspired a major film, and was translated into 25 languages. He spent the next eight years writing the rest of the story over the course of four books, now concluded with *The Living*. He lives and writes on Orcas Island and plays music in Seattle with the band Thing Quartet.

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blocks from the subway, with her partner, her dog, her two cats, and her ongoing mental refutation of and dialogue with the religious dogma her family tried to instill in her. Her book on ancestors is forthcoming from Random House.

Sara Nović is the author of the novel *Girl at War*, out now from Random House and Little, Brown UK, and available or forthcoming in thirteen more languages. *America is Immigrants*, short illustrated biographies of Americans hailing from all 195 countries, is coming from Random House in 2019. Nović is an assistant professor of creative writing at Stockton University, and lives in Philadelphia.

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J. L. Powers is the award-winning author and editor of nine books for adults, teenagers, and children, most recently *Under Water* in January 2019. In 2017, she launched Catalyst Press and Story Press Africa to publish African authors and illustrators and books based in Africa. She can be found online at www.powersquared.com, www.catalystpress.org, and www.jlpowers.net.

Frank Schaeffer is the author of more than a dozen books. These include his bestselling memoir about his exit from evangelical “royalty” — as the *New York Times* described the Schaeffer family in their review of *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*.

Deirdre Sugiuchi is finishing her fundamentalist reform school memoir, *Unreformed*, which takes place at Escuela Caribe, a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic. Sugiuchi's work has been featured in *Electric Literature*, *Guernica*, the *Rumpus*, *Shondaland*, and other places. Sugiuchi lives in Athens, Georgia, with her husband and son, where she's also a school librarian. Learn more at deirdresugiuchi.com.

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INTRODUCTION

CHRISSEY STROOP AND LAUREN O'NEAL

Lauren O'Neal was raised mainline Presbyterian in a San Francisco suburb, attending, then teaching, Sunday school, and singing in her youth group's worship band. Chrissy Stoop was raised Evangelical—Baptist, then Wesleyan, then independent Christian, then megachurch-inspired nondenominational—and was assured throughout it all by her church and Christian school that good Christians must always vote Republican. When we started talking with each other about our religious backgrounds, we discovered that although our upbringings had been quite different, we had found paths away from Christianity for many of the same reasons: the repression, the shame, the hypocrisy, and the growing realization that many of the church's teachings didn't make sense and were often actively harmful. We knew others had stories like ours, and we wanted to hear them. Thus the idea for this anthology of personal essays by people who have left various branches of right-wing Christianity was born.

The story of America's remarkably rapid secularization has made a splash in recent years, generating commentary that ranges from the celebratory to the concerned and even alarmist. One driver of this rise in irreligion is a large-scale exodus (pun not intended) from conservative Christianity. At the turn of the current century, UC Berkeley sociologists demonstrated that the Christian right has been "pushing political liberals from conservative denominations away from organized religion," a trend that's still ongoing.¹ In other words, the perennial (and perennially discussed) American culture wars have been a causal factor in the meteoric rise of the "nones," or religiously unaffiliated, who now represent a staggering 40 percent

of Americans under the age of thirty.²

In addition, conservative, mostly white evangelicals, who make up the core of the US Christian right, used to be able to brag that they were keeping their numbers up or even experiencing growth, while mainline Protestant denominations were in decline. This is no longer the case. Even with adult conversions and a steady influx of immigrant converts (a theme that comes up in this anthology), evangelicals are in serious decline. White evangelicals now make up only 15 percent of America's population, and only 10 percent of Americans under thirty. Nevertheless, they remain politically powerful under Donald Trump, and they have kept their proportion in the US electorate steady at 25 percent in recent election cycles despite their declining raw numbers.³ In the age of Trump, whose single most supportive demographic has been and remains white evangelicals, it has become clear that right-wing Christians—evangelicals, radical traditionalist Catholics, and Mormons—are authoritarians who will dismantle democracy before they will give up power.

In our view, this situation demands that the voices of those of us who have experienced the religious right from the inside, often being indoctrinated and mobilized for the culture wars in ways that caused us long-term damage, be given a hearing. One purpose of this book is to provide a forum for the perspectives of those who, for whatever reasons, found it impossible to remain in the politically pernicious, reality-averse, and often abusive—yet still all too influential—subculture of Jesus Land, USA. Though we started putting the project together before 2016, the Christian nationalist backlash the country is facing under Trump makes the insights and perspectives of escapees from Jesus Land all the more important. And though the project also predates Chrissy's successful Twitter hashtag #EmptyThePews—a protest against the Christian right that highlights its loss of the youth—we felt that hashtag's message was not only more urgent than ever but also a perfect encapsulation of the cultural movement away from conservative Christianity that we're trying to capture.

Our goal is to showcase personal essays by a diverse group of authors with different denominational backgrounds, paths to the loss of faith, and attitudes toward religion today. We want to capture a wide variety of experiences of conservative Christianity, shedding

light on both the individual aspects and commonalities found in the stories of survivors of an authoritarian religious ideology that ultimately failed to contain our spirits.

We start with a section on purity culture, as conservative Christianity is arguably characterized by nothing so much as a pathological fear, and the obsessive policing, of sex and sexuality, despite ongoing and predictable sex-abuse scandals, both Catholic and Protestant. A particular kind of purity culture—one associated with purity rings, purity pledges, and strictly heteronormative abstinence-only sex education in which girls who have had sex are compared to chewed gum or worse—became a hallmark of American evangelicalism in the 1990s. Here, Sara Nović writes about how this indoctrination was part of the process through which she was groomed toward her future of accidentally marrying a gay man, while Carmen Maria Machado writes about how it primed her for a toxic relationship with a predatory youth pastor.

Usually, for adherents of this kind of repressive Christianity, queer people are not supposed to exist, and when their existence cannot be ignored, it poses a problem to be solved, sometimes literally with references to Satan. Given that objections to the legalization of same-sex marriage and the now seriously threatened expansion of transgender visibility and rights are drivers of the contemporary right-wing backlash, it is now more urgent than ever to amplify the voices of members of the LGBTQ community harmed by conservative Christianity. Garrard Conley and Rebekah Matthews both examine their respective experiences growing up gay in evangelical subculture. Conley even underwent so-called conversion therapy (the movie *Boy Erased* is based on his memoir about the experience), the immediate aftermath of which he explores in his essay here.

Conservative Christians often justify this trademark policing of sex and sexuality with the notion of a semimythological family unit defined by strict gender roles that place straight male dominance next to godliness. Deviating from this supposedly natural order is seen as an attack on the family, society, or even God himself—but expecting women to be subservient or punishing queer kids for being queer is somehow seen as beneficent. In our section on family matters, Matthew Clark Davison explores the beauty he found in Catholicism, and how it ultimately couldn't outweigh the damage the

church did to his mother and himself when they couldn't fit into its prescribed roles. Lyz Lenz also writes about beauty lost and beauty found in an essay about how even the loveliest religious aspirations end up untenable in the real world. Meanwhile, Lauren O'Neal (co-editor of this book) connects the controlling, punitive nature of conservative Christian politics to the kind of self-loathing that families so frequently pass down from generation to generation, and Maud Newton explores the impact a family's beliefs about heaven can have on a child.

It is that generational passing down that can make the family the prime site of abuse in conservative Christian contexts, which we explore in the next section, about trauma. Deirdre Sugiuchi and Mel Wells both reckon with the legacy of a childhood full of emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse, while an excerpt from Julia Scheeres's memoir *Jesus Land* goes into detail about a supposedly therapeutic Christian boarding school that turned out to be anything but. Peter Counter's trauma, on the other hand, came from outside the family, when a mugger shot his father and threw into question the way he'd previously thought of his faith.

The next part of the book concerns the intersection of American Christianity with other cultures. One of the main ways that happens is through missionary work. Here, J. L. Powers and Chrissy Stroop (the other coeditor of this book) both look back at their experiences doing missionary work, the former at the purported miraculous events that were supposed to prove Christianity true in some way, the latter at two short-term mission trips to Russia that factored into her loss of faith.

Of course, Christianity is hardly exclusive to the United States, but when a neocolonialist country takes pains to culturally dominate the globe, that country's version of Christianity ends up affecting other countries', regardless of whether that influence is being deliberately carried out by missionaries. Juliana Delgado Lopera's essay here explores what changed for her family when they went from being Catholics in Colombia to being evangelicals in a Colombian church in Miami. Ruby Thiagarajan writes about the reverse: her family didn't emigrate from Singapore, but the megachurches there drew so heavily on the work of American prosperity-gospel preachers that, in some ways, they might as well have.

Finally, we close the book with a section on intellectual journeys away from Christianity. This was a large part of the loss of faith for both Chris and Lauren, and we found that many of our contributors echoed it, not just in this section but throughout the anthology. How can some Christians demand people take the Bible literally when it directly contradicts itself several times? How can we be expected to learn ethics from a book that advocates the mass slaughter of innocent children? And what exactly is the metaphysical calculus that balances Jesus's death against the sins of humanity?

As Isaac Marion writes in his essay on the collective fantasy necessary to maintain Christianity, the church is supposed to offer "a description of the universe and humanity's role in it." If it's such an unassailable truth, why do young kids routinely get in trouble in Sunday school for asking questions that their teachers can't answer? Topher Lin was one of those curious kids, approaching religion so cerebrally that he asked his youth pastor for extra weekly Bible studies with an emphasis on apologetics—but, as his essay relates, he quickly became unsatisfied with the answers to his existential questions.

Rachel Ozanne found her path away from the faith of her youth with the help of philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Simone Weil, while Linda Tirado tried to piece religious truth together on her own amid the competing philosophies of Catholicism, Baptism, and Mormonism, all three of which were imposed upon her. And Rooney Wynn, who became a nonbeliever after a family tragedy, forged an intellectual path toward a new form of faith.

These are our stories—of heartbreak and hope, terror and courage, rupture and reconciliation. We hope they'll resonate with you in some way, whether you're a believer, a former believer, or one of the increasing number of people raised without religion. Love it or hate it, America has begun to empty the pews. May this anthology help usher in a new sort of testimony.

NOTES

1. Michael Hout, Claude S. Fischer, and Mark A. Chaves, "Most Americans Have No Religious Preference: Key Finding from the 2012 General Social Survey," Institute for the Study of Societal Issues press summary, March 7, 2013, http://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/faculty/fischer/Hout%20et%20al_No%20Relig%20Pref-%202012_Release%20Mar%202013.pdf.
2. Nina Burleigh, "Evangelical Christians Helped Elect Donald Trump, but Their Time as a Major Political Force Is Coming to an End," *Newsweek*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/12/21/evangelicals-republicans-trump-millennials-1255745.html>.
3. Ibid.

I

PURITY CULTURE,
SEXUALITY, AND QUEERNESS

LAND OF PLENTY

GARRARD CONLEY

In some versions, you may see a cross or an occasional conch. *When you saw only one set of footprints.* Above the shore, you may see a blue sky or a blinding orange sunrise or the airbrushed pink of a Floridian sunset. *It was then that I carried you.* I look at it now, this framed poster of two feet patterning sand, with the poem's lines overlaid in script, and I wonder, Whose feet *were* these? Who came to this bare patch of shore and put aside shoes to tread carefully in the damp? Nothing and no one else around, only this delicate ballerino now out of frame: invisible Jesus. Was there some committee, perhaps, in charge of surveying church members' feet to determine which arch seemed most Jesusy? Had there been a vote?

I've stood in this exact spot in my father's office at church countless times and never once, before this moment, considered the poem's origins. This double vision is relatively new. As recently as five years ago, I would have sought in these words the assurance that Jesus Christ would always be there for me during the trials and tribulations of my life. Now I know better. I walk past the frame to a windowed corner of my father's office where a fake baby palm collects dust, waiting for the voices in the foyer to quiet so I can enter the sanctuary unnoticed. My father's congregants will want to hug, pat my shoulders, tsk-tsk my skinniness. They will want to ask about the eastern European city I've been living in since graduating college, to know if they eat dogs over there. They will want to ask about women.

Gravel crunches on the other side of the window, a few stragglers my father likes to tease every Sunday morning. Bob, you ever gonna learn to set an alarm? These minor lapses, I almost envy them.

I haven't attended one church service since last summer's visit, the post-Soviet village where I now teach having long abandoned any significant religious affiliations, the Party's atheism enforced by schoolteachers as recently as two decades ago. At that time, my school director told me, if you see a neighbor go to church, you write their name down and send it to Moscow. There is a list, you see, and you do not want to be on this list. A nobler profession, I said, laughing a little. Good and bad things in this time, she said, so now people go to church, no one notices. As it should be, I said.

Several male voices in the foyer, the piano picking up somewhere behind them. Lord, a deep baritone says, help people open their hearts to you this morning. We pray for the glory and goodness of God's grace to fill up this church. This voice belongs to someone in my father's core prayer team, the brotherhood. I picture them in their usual huddle, arms wrapped around one another's shoulders. I've ducked into his office to avoid them. As the preacher's only son, I'm still seen as a natural extension of his ministry. The truth? The job always seemed harder than it should have.

I followed my father down neighborhood streets to knock on doors and distribute literature. I attended his jail ministry, visited hospitals to comfort the sick and dying (and, consequently, repentant). For a good decade, I read the onionskin pages of my name-embossed Bible every morning before school and every night before sleep. None of it—aside from the rare moments when I felt God's love spreading somewhere beneath my ribcage, a feeling of warmth and peace that left after only a few minutes—added up to ecstasy. You catch one glimpse of St. Theresa's famous marble throat waiting to be pricked, and Europe convinces you that the Protestants have long forgotten real pleasure. Potlucks, revivals, holiday services: each summer I come home, I'm astounded at the growing list of joyless responsibilities, a list I likely would have followed for the rest of my life had I not left. I watch my parents' lives narrow to fit this tiny corner of the Ozarks, and then I board another transatlantic flight.

Once, years ago, only six really, it was my mother and me on a plane out of this town, on our way to see real coconut palms, Joan Didion's "In the Islands" open on my tray table. I was nineteen, free for the summer. *I was going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life expanded to a novel.* That line rang like a jingle in my head the whole

trip. Whenever I felt an overwhelming sense of shame about the gay man I now believed myself to be: *I was going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life expanded to a novel*. When a tall, thick-dicked man stepped out of a mud bath and began to rinse himself in an open shower stall, my mother far away in a separate women's spa: *I was going to Honolulu because I wanted to see life expanded to a novel*. Whenever I recalled the circumscribed narrative my life had become after two weeks of "ex-gay" reparative therapy in the month before coming to these islands, a narrative that said I was addicted to gay sex, broken, God-forsaken: *I was going to Honolulu...*

I wasn't about to stop being gay any more than my father was about to stop being a preacher, and my mother wasn't about to stop being my mother and also his wife. She must have planned that trip to Hawaii so soon after my failed therapy because something in her knew we needed to escape my father's territory, that great buckle of the Bible Belt, or else our family might not make it another year.

Now, in my father's office at church, I hear the piano swelling, congregants' voices growing louder: *Beulah Land, I'm longing for you*. Or at least I think that's what they're playing. These songs blend together after a while, all that triumph and joy and longing bound up in a handful of chords. I'm already late. I grip one of the fake palm leaves, dust flaring in the morning light. On Diamond Head, you're more likely to be carried along the shore by a B-movie stunt double than a white-robed, invisible ballerino Savior, but the islands are still the closest most of our middle-class congregation has ever gotten to real paradise. Before church services, congregants share rubbery Wal-Mart photos of their trips, ink attributions smearing on their fingers and adding a well-worn quality to the mass produced. That they coo over these photos in a church sanctuary seems to add a sense of divine providence to these trips, as if one by one they are destined to reach those shores.

I wanted room for flowers, Didion writes, and reef fish, and people who may or may not be driving one another to murder but in any case are not impelled, by the demands of narrative convention, to say so out loud.

On Diamond Head, there had been flowers and reef fish; there had been leis and grass skirts and glittering glass facades that caught the sunrise and sunset and sent them back to you in spades; bottled water that cracked louder than knuckles to let you know it had never

been touched; there had been white arced beaches, and someone to come along and shift your shade as the sun moved across the sky, a physical luxury that embarrassed and excited me; ground-roasted pigs, sweet violet poi our bare-chested waiters warned might taste a little funny, and a sweet chili sauce my mother and I had never tasted before but that sent us to the gift shop to purchase several bottles so we'd never be without it for the foreseeable future. For two people raised in a small town, the sudden variety was an assault on the senses, and one we welcomed. After only a few days of paradise, we had already grown accustomed to a life of pampering. Whatever Tennessee Williams dramas awaited us upon our return seemed part of another life, meant for two other actors with significantly less enchanted roles.

Sitting in the buttery recessed light of a famous beauty parlor, shears clipping the back of my head, my mother and I watched my newly handsome face emerge from a messy tangle I'd let grow out over the past few distressing months. I thought, perhaps for the first time in my life, of how profoundly setting can sculpt us. Here in the islands, it seemed people wouldn't make such a fuss over what my life had become. Or at least they wouldn't waste their money on something as bleak as those white-walled "ex-gay" facilities and their stern-faced counselors.

If we die on this plane, my mother had said on the long ride over, how fast do you think we'll make it to heaven? Now, walking out of the beauty parlor to a view of the green-rimmed volcano, she was asking if we could stay in the islands forever, not in the least concerned with an abstract paradise. That time she'd almost drowned, at the age of eleven, the water had suddenly clouded, she told me, and a voice called out to her. Relax, the voice said. Relax. This is what water can do to a person, she told me. Not the water of my father's narrow baptistery, where he dips a newly converted congregant every other month in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but rather the deep expansive bodies that can swallow us whole at any moment. Relax. There's nothing more for you to do.

I was looking for you, my mother says now, in our church in Arkansas. She's standing in the office doorway, rhinestones winking on her sleeves. Dressed all in white lace and bejeweled, she is an angel, couture Precious Moments. I'm dressed the part as well: clean

cut with a white button-down. Coming off the plane, I'd been big-bearded and disheveled. My clothes have now been freshly laundered by a machine I haven't had access to for almost two years. If Hawaii was excess and the Ozarks sacrifice, what, then, has Ukraine been for me? Something different, I suppose, which is all that really matters when you're living between two extremes. When your mother is who she is and your father who he is and you are now who you are in a country neither of them has ever imagined, much less seen.

When she used to pick me up from school, I would feel shame at the outlandishness of her outfits, worried that some part of me was reflected in her physical garishness. My father had worried too, though we wouldn't know this until my freshman year of college, when my parents began talking to church leaders about "reparative" therapy. What if you spoiled the boy? he'd said to her. What if you spent too much time with him? All those malls? All that standing at makeup counters?

It's only an hour, she says now. No one's going to bite.

Everyone hates me in there, I say.

Everyone loves you. They pray for you every day.

For the wrong reasons, I say.

Still, I come to my father's morning service, half out of habit and half out of a desire to finally understand the schism that took place after I abandoned "ex-gay" therapy, after it became impossible to take seriously the notion that I could continue communicating with a God who seemed to prefer me dead to gay. Had it really happened? Had I imagined it all? Is it really possible, after all those years of church three times a week, of prayer before every meal and every night's sleep, to be free of shame at last? I need to know for certain, and I feel as though this Sunday — fresh off the plane from the tiny Ukrainian village I now call home, protected by the invisible bubble that reverse culture shock has placed between everything I once saw as making up the world and what I now know to be only a small part of the world, an isolated and incomplete part, even — this, out of all Sunday mornings, is the perfect time to test out my new agnosticism.

I follow my mother through the foyer to the sanctuary. We take a pew in the back, unnoticed. My father is sitting near the front, nodding to the music. My mother opens a hymnal and points to the spot

where we are. Something something blood of the Lamb. The piano sounds slightly out of tune, but then again, all these pianos sound the same, so it's hard to tell. I mumble along, careful not to pronounce the words too clearly. I'm afraid of making promises once again to capital-G God.

The deacons stand and walk to the front of the sanctuary to face us, heads bowed. A prayer that my father will be guided only by God's will. That he will remove any personal concerns and selfish thoughts from his mind and become a vessel for the Lord. The congregants shout amen, and my father slowly makes his way up the stage to the pulpit, Bible in hand, his newly graying hair not like the preachers' hair you see on TV but wispy and alive, crackling almost, as if some heavenly wind tousles only his head. He sighs, and the speakers pick up feedback, and he says, That's just the Holy Ghost testing the mic. In the nervous laughter that follows, you can feel the tension of my father's spiritual burden being temporarily released. He will start with these jokes, see, and this will make room in our hearts for the seriousness to come.

It's my father's signature move. In the jail ministry, it was candy preceding the sobering message to follow; on neighborhood visits, it was bags of popcorn. I would hold the bags in my hands, a goofy grin on my face, and when my father gave the cue, usually a slight nod, I'd hand them over. *Suffer little children, my father would quote, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 19:14, KJV). He would run a rough hand through my hair and say, Pretty good kid, ain't he? in a Southern vernacular he rarely used outside of those visits. The drawl, the ain'ts, the Well, I don't know about thats. I've never seen him speak to someone in a voice that isn't their own. When it's just him and me now, I'm careful not to say too much, not to reveal the new registers I've adopted as a way of distancing myself from the voices of my childhood. I once gifted him a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and by the end of the week he'd emailed me two of the poems from inside. Inspired by Whitman's capacious love for the world, they were overwhelmingly erotic missives to Jesus in heaven, though I'm sure my father never understood them that way, such is his ability to find the decent in anything and fashion it to his purposes.

I don't know why this happened, he says now, laughing. I can't

begin to explain it. One second you're typing away in your study, and the next something hits you. Just like a hand slapping your face. I bet you know what I'm talking about, Ray. You look at Ray and think at some point somebody must've slapped that grin off his face.

Amen, a few congregants shout. Laughter.

Nah, I'm just kidding, Ray. Ray's a beacon of hope. Always smiling. Every time I look out at this crowd, always smiling. Like I was saying, I was just sitting in my study and felt a slap, like God was telling me to wake up. I had a whole sermon prepared for you nice folks. Weeks of work. Late nights. But I laid all that aside and started listening to what the Lord was telling me. Now I don't know if everyone here has experienced this, he says, his gaze following the line of pews to where my mother and I are sitting, but I know my son has, haven't you, son?

And here is the moment of drawing in that I've been dreading all morning. I resist the familiar tug of my father's words, ignore the congregants' stares, and fix my eyes on the wooden edge of the pulpit, my lips in a slight smile I hope is indiscernible. My heartbeat's going wild, and I wonder if people around me can hear it in the quiet pause. My mother turns to stone beside me. We are slipping into our old roles, I think, already on our way back to the "ex-gay" facility, but the double vision hasn't left me yet. I am both his son and not his son. I am both native and tourist. A speaker of tongues he does not yet know. Believer and nonbeliever.

How do I describe it? he says. That feeling you get when inspiration strikes. A voice, a call. You think the message is adding up to one thing, and it turns out it's something completely different. My son writes these stories, and he tells me after a while that characters start acting on their own, leading lives you'd never wanted them to lead, and the best you can do is follow their voices. How many times has this been true in my life? I never dreamt I'd be standing before you as your pastor. I never thought God would use me for this. I never thought I'd hear God's voice so clearly saying to me, You'd better drop everything and take up the cross and follow me. But here I am, he says, his right hand slapping the pulpit, standing before you.

Standing before me, my father is claiming yet another territory, this expanse of the imagination to which I thought I alone in my

family held the key. On my first day at the facility, my “ex-gay” counselors ripped five pages of a short story from my notebook. They wadded the pages into a ball and tossed them in a nearby trash can and said, *False Image*, as if that was all they were. No room for distractions here. Only God’s voice allowed.

Whenever I see Baptist missionaries on the streets of Ukraine, I think, Don’t you have enough already? Go back home to the Southern towns where a church rests on every street corner. Go back home to the country that loves your fundamentalism so much it’s willing to vote against its population’s best interests. Go back home to a South that spends so much time and energy killing its children. Why do you need this place too? But that’s the thing about proselytizers, isn’t it? The word comes from the Greek *proselytos*, meaning “stranger.” Christians have always seen themselves as strangers in a strange land, never at home in this vile world because their mansion awaits them in heaven. There are no real borders to cross on this earth, because the only border that matters is the one above their heads. They see no end to God’s dominion. *I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own*, Whitman writes. *And limitless are leaves stiff and drooping in the fields*. Of course my father loves him.

So I kept writing, my father says, stepping out from behind the pulpit and beginning to pace the stage, and I wrote for hours and hours. All night. And you know the funny thing about all this time I spent writing? The message God was telling me to share with you folks? It was a message about the nature of time itself. How a thousand years on earth is as a day in heaven. Now I’m not a big math person, he says, stepping down from the stage and wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. I just about failed all those courses in high school, but would you believe it, Sister Julie, if I said to you an entire lifetime on this earth—that is to say, about a hundred years if we’re lucky—is only one-tenth of a day in heaven? Why, that’s nothing but a blip in the universe. A blink of the eye. You see, Sister Julie, I think what God was trying to tell me was that I needed to stop focusing on the small things, on how many hours I spent trying to type up a sermon for you. I needed to focus on how few hours we actually have left on this earth. How few opportunities I have to spread the message to you folks that Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again to heaven to intercede on our behalf so that we might have

everlasting life.

My mother shifts uncomfortably beside me. She knows the literalism gets to me. On the islands, she had been able to laugh with me at the performative spectacle of faux-native Hawaiian life. Now she's looking away, at the giant mural of a map on the sanctuary's right wall. Hawaii is too small to see from here.

I could write my father's words myself, I think, without God's voice whispering in my ear, and in under an hour. Joke, theory of life, anecdote, Bible verse, altar call. Everything neat and tidy by lunch, perhaps a nap in the late afternoon.

You see, Sister Julie, it is only people like my father who think life is too short. When you're in "ex-gay" therapy and witness a man standing before your group to confess for perhaps the seventh or eighth time to yet another suicide attempt, scars marking his unsuccessful ventures, you begin to think differently about how much longer you have on this earth. How many times had I run the scissors' blades across my neck, staring into a face I no longer recognized, terrified by the fact that if I did not change my sexuality on some fundamental molecular level, I would lose my family and friends and the town I grew up in? How many times did I look back on eighteen years and curse God for leaving me in my greatest time of need?

Time, without the comforts of family or God or a place to call home, is not something all of us automatically crave. My father's assumptions about us only work if we swallow them whole, without thinking, as I had for most of my life. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? the famous angelological question goes. An infinite number, my father would say, if only you believe in angels. Turn to any page of the Bible and look on it with believing eyes, and you will find a thousand new interpretations, you will spawn a thousand new denominations; already within the Baptist spectrum alone there are hundreds.

Now I know some of you today have been touched by this message, my father says, heading to the center of the altar and falling to his knees, head bowed. I can see it in your eyes. I'm not gonna name names or point any fingers.

The pianist makes her way to the stage, and as she begins playing, the music is soft and quiet, a lullaby. When I was a baby, my

father would hold me to his chest and rock me, singing a song he must have made up one midnight hour when I wouldn't stop crying. *He's a good old boy to me. He's a good old pal to me. He's a good old boy, he's a good old pal, he's a good old friend to me.* I remember that song even now, even in the very moment I want most of all to distance myself from him, even though it seems impossible to recall such an early memory. I remember it not because the lullaby was an ear-worm but because of the way his voice vibrated throughout my entire body. I can approximate the tune by conjuring the feel of those vibrations in his chest, a feeling so overwhelming that when the tune passed through me, it was my entire world. There was no other sensation. I remember drifting into sleep as the world dimmed around me.

Someone in this room feels Jesus calling their heart, my father says, his voice filling with sorrow. I know it. We're going to close our eyes, all of us in here, and we're going to ask God to touch this person. Lord, please give him or her the strength to walk down this aisle and surrender to Jesus. Please, Lord, while the music plays softly. Lord, you are the Almighty, the mover of mountains. You have the power to change this one person's life, to save his soul from eternal hellfire. A few congregants move past me to the altar. Oh, please, Lord, they shout. Please help him.

No matter how many years have passed, no matter how many times I've argued with my father about homosexuality in the Bible, no matter how many trips home I take, I always think he's talking about me in such moments. The music swells. *Beulah Land*, congregants sing. *Sweet Beulah Land*.

I stay rooted to my spot, immovable mover.

THANK YOU!

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *Empty the Pews*. Our hope with this project is to hold space for those who, for diverse reasons, have like us found it impossible to remain in the politically pernicious, reality-averse, and often abusive—yet still all too influential—subculture of Jesus Land, USA. Your interest in these stories is a strong sign that the voices of former conservative Christians need to be heard now more than ever. Thank you again for listening.

We'll let you know as soon as the book is available so you can read the rest of the essays. In the meantime, you can follow Chrissy at cstroop.com or on Twitter at @C_Stroop, and you can follow Lauren on Twitter at @laureneoneal.

-Chrissy and Lauren