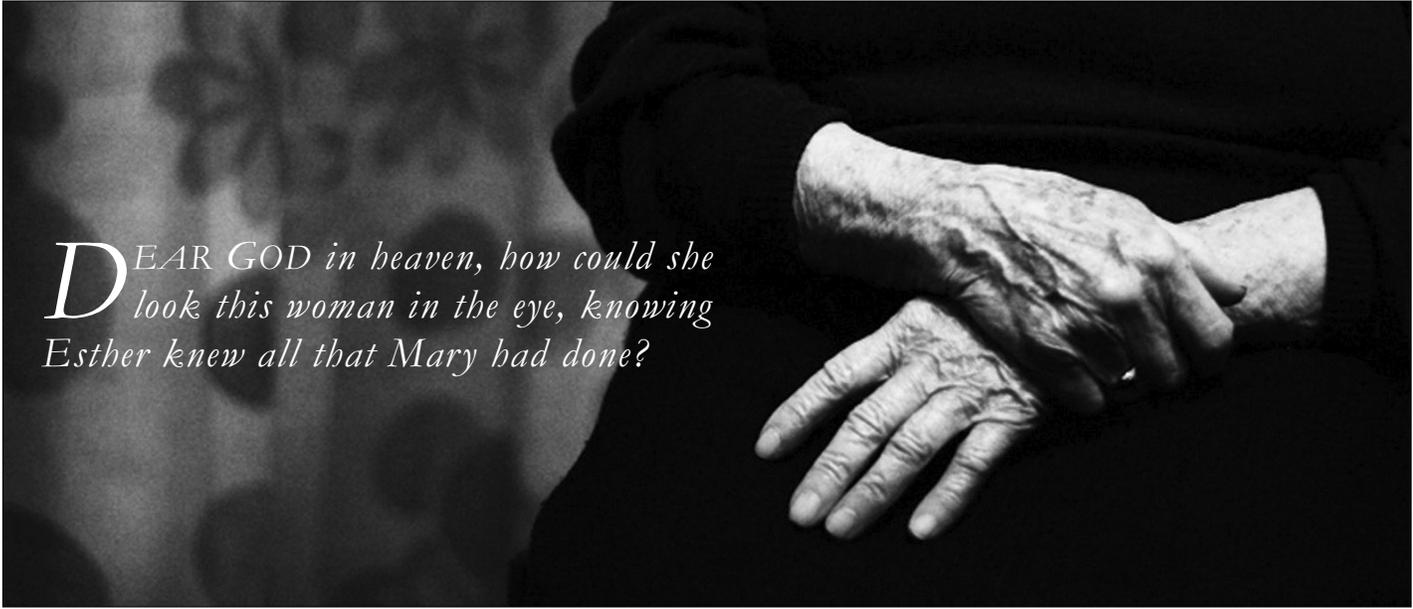


2005 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

CLOTHING ESTHER

By Lisa Torcasso Downing



DEAR GOD in heaven, how could she look this woman in the eye, knowing Esther knew all that Mary had done?

MARY HAD STOOD BEFORE HER MOTHER-IN-LAW countless times before this. Stood before her more than beside her, the way Esther had always wanted her. *Help me with this roast, Mary; Come sing while I play; Read to me awhile, won't you, dear?* Most women who are bound together by their love for a man who is, to one, the protected and the beloved, and to the other, the protector and the lover, get their heads and hearts all snarled together so that neither reason nor tender feeling can be loosed to a useful satisfaction. Sometimes, though, life waters people instead of drying them out. Sometimes standing before someone becomes less a stance of submission and more a pose, a position that is neither weak nor strong, but one which simply allows the other to



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look upon the one. Curiosity, envy, affection, all kneaded together like dough, rising quietly in a warm spot on the kitchen counter.

Mary, you have to knead the dough with your knuckles.

Devotion: Mary and her husband Lance had taken in Esther and her husband George two weeks before George was diagnosed with stomach cancer, twelve weeks before he died, leaving ten weeks for Mary to learn to pose before Esther, ten weeks to establish the new habit of standing before.

ROUNDING DOWN, THE years between the death of Lance's father and the death of his mother were sixteen. Mary had plodded along them like a tired horse on a familiar trail, passing detours and distractions with little more than a tail flick, pausing only to provide suck or to again foal. Mary had not been unhappy, and neither had Esther, who enjoyed the pleasure of sleeping a wall away from her eldest son.

And of course there were the grandchildren.

But the nights often bore down hard on Mary. Her secret fear was that the darkness—that bit which tore into her senses

like soil—was attached not to the spinning universe, but to her own spiraling mind. Over the years, Mary had shared many things with Esther, a bathroom scale, sometimes a hairbrush, and, of course, the children. Yet, she never shared (wouldn't want to bother her with) every little worry or wonder in her brain, whether it popped in only every now and again or whether it had taken up permanent residence. Simple things had vanished, and though Mary swept under the table for them and hoped bleach would reveal them, she just couldn't put her finger on the simple things Esther always told the children we were on this planet to enjoy.

Certainly the path Mary trod is common, full of head colds, Scout meetings, and parent-teacher conferences, but with Esther always before her to cluck and nod and encourage, Mary moved along with a sense of purpose. She was building a family, a thing she did not at all know how to do, while Lance, especially in more recent years, was off building communication systems in Thailand or Sri Lanka, an important service in anyone's book. The difficult nights were Mary's "alone nights," and during them, she lay awake and still, staring up into the darkness and listening beyond the sheet rock for some symptom, any sign, of Esther's life—a cough, a moan, a snore, even the hummed notes of a pioneer hymn; something to assure her that all is well. Any sound which seeped through the wall or under the door into the crevices of her mind came as a sound from heaven, testifying that this path was the chosen one, and Esther, her unlikely companion.

Of course roads end—sometimes abruptly—and Esther's road was like this. An unexpected and wholly massive stroke put a quick halt to Esther's plans for Sunday dinner. Tonight Lance would've been on a jetliner to Corporate in Chicago, but instead he is at home, watching the kids watch him and not knowing at all what to do when Colleen spits at him, then locks herself in the bathroom. And Mary, who should've been at home helping Colleen with her four's times table and Marcus with his solar system report and refereeing her three teenage sons as they fight over the computer, instead finds herself standing before Esther. Finds herself staring down at Esther, staring down at her mother-in-law as she lies upon her back, is laid on a stainless steel table in a stark back room of the Village Gate Funeral Home.

MARY CLUTCHES THE overnight bag, examines the green hospital gown in which Esther is clothed. She wills herself not to glance again at Esther's face, not to see what she noticed immediately: that this face she loves—with its small hump on the bridge of the nose and that old-age wattle beneath the chin, with its thin lips and elongated cheeks—has been made unfamiliar through the subterfuge of a mortician's make-up sponge.

Beside Mary stands a woman, and this woman has a voice, soft, smooth. Her touch lands on Mary's elbow, then comes a tug against the suitcase. Mary resists. That which she has carefully packed inside this bag is sacred to her and to Esther: the white gown, the ceremonial vestments worn in the temple,

and the holy garment. The voice again, tender, and Mary comprehends, gives in, releases the case which the woman places atop the counter behind them.

"I'll show the others in as soon as they arrive." Another touch, this time on her shoulder, then footsteps across tile; the pull of the door and its attending, vacuum-like sensation as the woman withdraws; and then the hush. . . .

There is a moment in every life when we learn, we see, we slam head-on into the comprehension that what we always knew is no longer real, that experience is unduly egocentric, that color is subjective, and that silence cannot be where breathing is found. We have, all of us, we have said it, have said, Sit still, Hold still, Simmer down, Be still. Even God Himself has commanded it. And yet, when we face the face of death, when we see the ones we've seen every day truly stilled and made artificial by life's last word, only then do we begin to sense how hollow our minds are; how empty, how barren of things known. In that moment—that lonely, isolated, imperative moment—the only thought we can form, the only word we can hold on to, is that one simple word; that odd, unanswerable word. *How?* Not "How could this happen?" nor "How will we manage?" Only, "How?"

Right now, Mary stands in this moment; and that simple, syllable is gyrating in her mind, gathering nothing, not even a dusting of sense, but spreading itself thinly, evenly, line upon line, an anaesthetic-like numbness between reality and acceptance. Her hands remain at her sides, and yet she desperately reaches for something to hold on to, an edge into which she can sink her teeth, a ledge onto which she can crawl; something with which she can save herself from facing herself, from looking down and seeing the great nothing that becomes us. When a distant door bangs, from Mary there comes no reaction.

MARY HAD BEEN only sixteen when she married Lance, himself only seventeen. The ceremony occurred in her mother's backyard beneath a rented arch laced with crepe paper and pink silk roses. She married him before a sparse, outdoor congregation of relatives, voyeuristic ward members, and high school baseball players. The bride and groom, respectively a sophomore and a senior, were nothing more than a pair of everyday kids who had become too familiar with one another, a clumsy pair of kids who confused exotic with erotic, and who believed, for a few brief minutes anyway, that passion might transport them away from the mundane. Of the two, she loved the most, loved with a zeal she felt could heal his wounds and make him visible in the same way that heat in the desert makes the air above the road visible, causing it to wave back and forth, all silvery, and be noticed. An illusion, perhaps; but to Mary, at sixteen, illusion and vision were more than bedfellows. They were creators of life.

George had raged at his son and then wept. Esther had closed the bedroom door and stared.

It had been Mary's mother who begrudgingly made these arrangements and Mary's mother who had footed the bill. But

it was Mary who paid and Mary who lived with the consequences. It was Mary's ears which rang with her mother's incessant whine: *worthless whore, worthless Mormons. Don't ruin your life. Don't marry him. No one has to know.* But of course everyone knew. They may not have known Mary's mother cursed when the girl stubbornly asked if she was coming out to the wedding, may not have realized the woman lay drunk on the sofa throughout, but still they knew. They saw. The fact was undeniable: Mary gave herself away.

Lance's father was not an educated man, but he had had sense and enough connections to land himself a career position in the public relations department of the Church during the early 1960s, about the time things were heating up. The pay, of course, was not substantial, especially for a man with six children, but it had been enough to allow him a mortgage on a five-bedroom rambler situated on a couple of acres outside the city limit. When Lance's wedding plans were announced, George cashed out the meager savings he had accumulated for his son's mission and bought him a wedding gift, a twenty-foot tin can with a bed, a kitchen, and an impossibly small bathroom. He parked it on the acreage behind the house.

His gift to his "new daughter" (he had swallowed when he said it) was a promise, a finger-in-Lance's-chest sort of promise, which he made to her as he looked Lance in the eye and proclaimed: "You're finishing school." Both he and Lance, both Mary and Esther, knew he didn't mean just high school. "You've got a family," her father-in-law said, straightening up while loosening his tie, and Mary's heart beat and beat and beat. "And you're going to live up to it." He handed Lance the key to the trailer, then walked away and around the few Relief Society sisters who remained, kindly picking up fallen napkins and emptying punch bowls into the garden. Mary's eyes followed him, looked beyond him, and saw in the distance, somewhere over the salt flats, tufted white clouds against the hazy sky. The year was 1977.

1977. . . Hair was still worn long. The bottoms of blue jeans still belled. The blacks would never hold the priesthood. The Berlin Wall was immovable, and Mary stood before Esther in a long dress of white lace she'd bought at Deseret Industries using her babysitting savings.

Everyone had gone home in a flash, everyone except Lance and his parents. All Mary had left to do was step inside her mother's house, change into her street clothes, and walk into a new life, become a new wife, and soon a mother—a grown-up. Esther offered to help her, but of course Mary said no. Of course she said no. She said no, and her lip quivered. Esther took her chin and tipped it up, looked into her pale eyes, and they locked eyes. But only for a moment, the tiniest, briefest of moments, before Mary slammed hers shut. Dear God in heaven, how could she look this woman in the eye, knowing Esther knew all that Mary had done, that she had willingly spread her legs to entice her son, that she had robbed him of his status in the Church, had embarrassed his family, hurt them in a way that no temple sealing ceremony a year down the road could completely heal?

It was all her fault. Lance had been good—the first assistant

to the bishop—he had been that good. She had never been anything, not even bad, and hardly ever present. In fact, more days than not, Mary bedded down wondering: Had the day really happened? Did she really exist? Or was her life someone else's dream?

So it was odd, the way Mary opened her eyes when Esther said, "Look at me, child," odd the way Mary responded with both arms to Esther's tug on her hand, an invitation into an embrace, and odder still the way Mary's eyes watered and simply couldn't stop. It was 1977. The world stood somewhere between war and peace. And Mary, this little Mary who had never taken up more space than was absolutely necessary, had seen, in that fragile, unexpected moment, the world turn in Esther's eyes.

FOOTSTEPS SOUND ALONG the tiled corridor, the heel-toe click of pumps, one pair. Mary inhales deeply, smells witch hazel. The shoes stop. Another door closes, and Mary exhales, the sound fading.

She turns from Esther to the suitcase on the stainless counter. It sits between a plastic filing box and a fist-sized clock which is plugged into a socket over the backsplash. She hates having become, by default, the presiding matriarch of a family that the winds of responsibility have scattered like sand. She tugs on the zipper and opens the lid. How she does not want to do this.

But when such things are expected, such things are done. She removes two transparent packages, each marked with the rose-colored symbol of Beehive Clothing. It is her duty to clothe Esther—to hide her most intimate self—in the sacred garments, in their silky white camisole and knee-length bottoms, to adorn her in a white gown and in the robes of the Holy Priesthood.

And so last evening, after the children had finally fallen asleep and as Lance wept alone in their bed, Mary had steam-ironed Esther's hand-embroidered apron; she had carefully heat-creased each fold of the robe; she ran the sash along the length of the ironing board and pressed it to a beautiful sheen. To the temple packet, she had added her own never-used knee-high white stockings. Then today, on the way to Village Gate, she had purchased at a department store a pair of white satin slippers to replace the worn pair Esther had used in the temple each week.

Mary lays one garment package beside the clock, presses the other against her chest. She turns back to her mother-in-law.

Four other women whom Mary trusts to know better than she how to dress the dead are on their way. But it is Esther who needs dressing, Esther who is dead. And so, with only twenty minutes between now and the appointed time of their arrival, it is Mary who steps forward.

Lance should not have asked this of her.

Her eyes traverse Esther, toe to crown. Where is the trembling hand? That forward tilt of her right shoulder?

When his father passed away, Lance had chosen not to par-

ticipate in clothing him in the temple garb. His great regret remains that he cast that one last dignity to strangers. So with the pronouncement of his mother's death still ringing in Mary's ears, Lance had put his foot down. "We owe my mother this dignity." He had repeated himself at the breakfast table. And in the den. And in the car. He had even told the funeral planner, his fingers pressing tightly into Mary's waist, "We owe it to her."

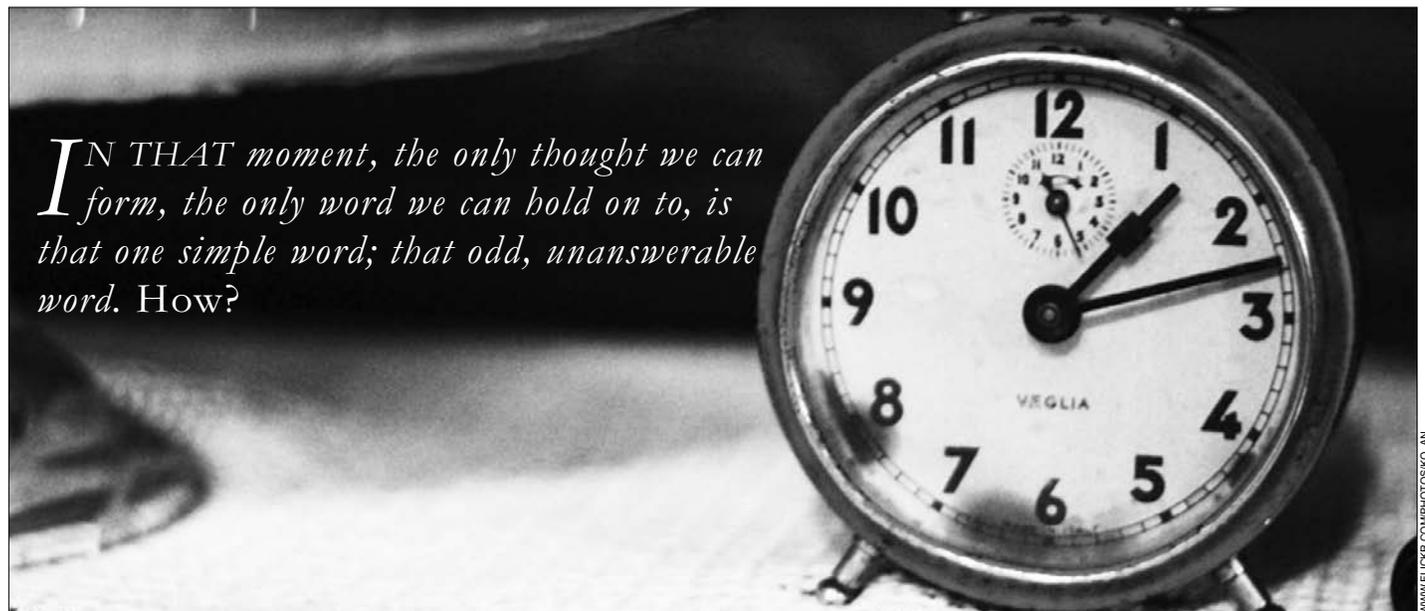
Inside each Mormon temple is a place which is like no other—a quiet, veiled-in space where initiate blessings are granted, woman to woman; a place where two sisters in faith, two strangers, stand before one another, look one another in the eye and touch one soul against the other, fingertip to flesh,

No. With every breaking sinew in Mary's body, she does not want to do this.

Using the nail of her index finger, Mary scratches at the cleft of Esther's chin until the old age spot shows through. Grandma's chocolate drop. The children will expect to see it.

She straightens, thinks, *How?* Meaning, *How can Lance expect this of me?*

The answer comes—though she neither expects it nor feels ready to receive it—as an impression in her mind, more an image than an actual memory, more like the touch of the Spirit than a process of the brain; an answer which allows Mary to see as though through a window back to a day when Esther had stood in the front of a chapel wearing a deep coral suit



*I*N THAT moment, the only thought we can form, the only word we can hold on to, is that one simple word; that odd, unanswerable word. How?

and repeat the words of a blessing and an anointing, the undefiled intimacy of which reflects the very depths of God's eternal love for woman, and through her, for all his children. And Mary has been there.

It is not that she is thinking of this place as she stands before Esther this final time, for the years between back-then and now have dimmed the flame of this memory. Rather, she is feeling the experience in much the same way an old woman sitting in a breeze beside the last blooms of summer feels her first kiss, feels it neither in her heart nor in her mind, but all along that tendril we call the soul. In truth, Mary is scarcely aware that her left hand is rising or that her fingers are curled like the petal of a tulip. She is barely aware that the garment package has slipped from her hand onto Esther's forearm, or that her hip presses against the stainless steel table.

When Mary's fingertips alight on Esther's right cheek, she draws back her hand—the absence of warmth, the lack of response—and takes in the whole of Esther's face. Touching again, she pushes against the subtle sag, a stubborn remainder of that grotesque twist which had marred Esther's face while she lay dying in the ICU. The skin feels cool; the cosmetics, waxy and moist.

with a daisy pinned to her lapel and had leaned over a coffin to bestow a final kiss. Not on George, for his coffin had been large, black, and stately.

Suddenly, as Mary envisions a long-ago Esther leaning over a small, white casket, the memory of a once-told story flows back, the tale of Lance's youngest sister, of how Lance had left her unattended in the pool at the house of one of his junior varsity teammates, and of how the angel at the top of the family's Christmas tree had come to be named Kristie: The story of how Lance had disappeared inside himself, where Mary had found him.

Suddenly it is clear: Lance expects because Esther did.

Mary dusts the white gray curls from Esther's forehead.

Sadly, what Mary most wants to know is unknowable. What is knowable, she thinks, as her finger gently twists one of Esther's locks, is that she is the "we" and has always been. Lance never knew it: He never really saw.

She places a hand on either side of Esther and gazes at the chocolate drop.

Lance had come to think of Mary as his partner, the same way he considered the two women in his domestic life a team. But Mary understands the truth: Lance may bring home his

paycheck, may sometimes even take her to a movie; but the only thing which leaves him feeling truly alive is sharing the blessing of modernization with strangers in foreign places. He knows his mother baked cookies for the kids and read them Beatrix Potter only because Mary told him, but she didn't mention—and he never noticed—that Esther's bedroom door always closed at eight and that the crumbs which were left were Mary's to wipe away.

Bending her elbows, she slowly lowers herself.

Not that Mary minded cleaning up. Hers was a heart grown in the soil of gratitude, in that relief which comes from having been put alone in the dark, in the dirt, and then feeling the rain of heaven fall.

There is water here, tears in Mary's eyes as she hovers over Esther's face, looking down on the features of the woman who had showered love upon her life even though she never deserved it. A tear lands on Esther's cheek. Good-bye is so hard, so Mary waits . . . holds out for the miracle, for that puff of spent air which surely will arise from Esther's mouth. The fallen tear slowly tracks down Esther's cheek, leaving a trail upon her made-up face. Esther deserves a miracle.

But nature, as it most often will, triumphs over miracle, and soon Mary must exhale, must let go, must feel and hear her own breath slowly escaping her lungs, unanswered. As her exhale sweeps across Esther's mouth and nose, Mary tenderly presses her lips against Esther's cold, unresponsive mouth. She pulls back, hovers inches over Esther's face, and her soul gathers up final intimacies like the sun draws moisture over a desert pond. Then she says it, whispers it really, whispers it like a call, implores, says, "Esther?"

And the response, of course the response remains only, the response remains nothing more than the quiet murmur of her own heart, of her own breath, of her own soul.

This—Mary straightens, wiping her eyes—is the woman who taught me how. With one hand, she clutches the steel rim of the table. *How to change a diaper. How to bake whole wheat bread.* The other hand comes to rest on the plastic package from Beehive Clothing which has come to rest in the crook of Esther's elbow. *How to survive.* She closes her fingers around the garment package, lifts her chin—*How to forgive*—and she scans the air over Esther's body. Though she strains to detect even the faintest aura or apparition or manifestation or sign, Mary understands that Esther is not here, that she can no longer exist in this mortal sphere except in Mary's mind, that she has gone home to those who've gone before.

Resigning herself, Mary lifts the package and tears through the plastic. Certainly the robes of the Holy Priesthood are one thing, a public thing in comparison to this. Mary holds the sacred garment against her bodice. This, Mary thinks, smoothing the silky fabric of the pant leg, is quite another. This will be Mary's gift.

THE TREAD OF Esther's foot had experienced the excess of seventy-five years of wear. The callouses, cracked and white, are all still here, on top of the little toe, on the underside of the

big one, and on the pad at the base of it. Oddly, pink veins, where there should be blue, traverse the summit of Esther's foot. Her toenails are clipped, filed, and painted pale pink. Mary pinches off the memory of Colleen's slumber party, of seven little girls with cotton between their toes and seven little bottles of glitter nail polish lined up atop an unabridged dictionary. Those cotton balls had been Esther's idea. She begins with Esther's right foot. Mary gathers up her courage as she gathers up one leg of the garment bottom, and then loops the fabric over Esther's toes, which point straight up, a position which seems unnatural considering her state of repose. Enough space exists between Esther's feet so that Mary's right hand slips between them nicely.

Next Mary wills the fingers of her left hand to temporarily release the fabric. She then slides the palm of her hand into the narrow space between the steel table and Esther's ankle. She lifts: The tendon gives, startling Mary, who had supposed *rigor mortis* to be a permanent state for the human dead. But after a closed-eye moment in which she regroups her determination and chastises herself for the uneasiness in her stomach, she continues, lifting the foot with one hand and sliding the garment past the heel with the other. The foot is not light, but the act is easier to perform than she anticipated. She takes heart, then repeats the motion on Esther's left side.

With Esther's feet properly through the legs of the sacred garment, Mary surveys the situation. Esther's legs are shaved and the skin loose, especially about her knees, but Mary realizes that the thighs beneath the hospital gown remain a formidable obstacle. She hooks both thumbs and each finger into opposite sides of Esther's right garment leg and pulls it to where the calf meets steel. Perhaps this gift Mary is offering is only a weak outward sign of what she feels for Esther—Mary does the same with the left leg—but at least it is discernible. With her task on the left side likewise completed, Mary hunches down and force-wiggles the garment between Esther's calf and the steel. Clothing Esther would be easier with someone there to lift the leg, but Mary will not have her gift diminished. In this world in which so little can be known, discernible becomes certainty enough. Therefore Mary continues alone, successfully tugging the hem of each garment leg to the appropriate spot three inches over each kneecap.

From here on, Mary's hands move in secret beneath the hospital gown, pulling, tugging, urging this to end. Thread at a seam pops quietly as Mary contends resolutely with Esther's bulk. In this effort to raise honor to Esther's most private and sacred self, Mary is discovering that the weight of death is a much heavier burden than she ever could have known.

THE TIME WILL collapse before Mary knows it, and the four women whom she invited to assist her in clothing Esther will arrive, respectfully clad, reverently hushed, shown in by the rail-thin woman who had touched Mary's shoulder. These five will find Mary sitting on the cold, tile floor, her legs extended, her head propped against one of the steel table legs. Her eyes will be wide, red; her cheeks damp,

and her hair out of place. The four women, her friends, will rush to her, cooing words of comfort, words like, “Mary, oh Mary, you know this is too hard,” “Mary, you shouldn’t have come alone,” and “Sweet Mary, how Esther must have loved you.”

The mortuary hostess will roll over a chair for Mary, and the sisters from the Church will insist she elevate herself and sit. So she will. The reward for her obedience will be the feel of their soft hands on her shoulders and hair. She will nod that she is all right. Of course she is; yes, all is well. The hostess will leave them. All is well.

“We should pray,” one of the sisters will suggest, and Mary will watch them bow their heads.

But she will not join them. Instead Mary will sit in the black chair on caster wheels and stare at this closing rendition of Esther, at her legs left splayed and her hair mussed, at the hospital gown smoothed as flat as Mary could manage. The prayer will end swiftly, and the women will turn their attention to the overnight bag and to the white gown and the robes of the Holy Priesthood which remain inside it, undisturbed. Mary, who will use her feet to glide the chair out of their way, will make herself look on their faces as they raise the hem of Esther’s hospital gown and gasp, as they pull the green, cotton fabric from her shoulder and whisper in worried glances, as they see for themselves how Mary’s good intentions measure against death.

“Oh, Mary,” one of them will murmur, “you can’t do this alone.”

Mary, whose chair will then rest near Esther’s feet, will flick her gaze from the face of this known stranger down to Esther’s strange face and remember the last time she had sat beside her. An IV had been dripping while monitors recorded what had seemed important. Though the medical staff had worked, though the priesthood had blessed, though Mary and Lance had prayed, Esther’s eyes had still rolled heavenward and fixed themselves eternally there. Only then had Lance put his arm around Mary and led her, weeping, from the ICU.

Today Mary will find no comfort except that which comes from wrapping her own arms about herself. She will cringe as her friends jointly push, pull, and shove the woman she loves into positions amenable to dressing a corpse. The ladies will be discreet, of course, will avert their eyes, will not see what only Mary sees, given her vantage point in the chair, when, during that first violent roll, Esther’s hospital gown defies decorum in favor of gravity, opening a glimpse of Esther’s faded pubic region. Instantly Mary will think of Lance, of where he came from, bloodied and wet; instantly she will feel in her groin a dark shadow, the black press, which marks the descent of a child; and then, almost as though the one hunted the other, an image of the battered Christ standing before those cursed souls who cast lots for his vesture. Each image, each worry, each fear will tear into her as that cruel and familiar bit has, for decades, torn into her confidence; will tear in and grind out the words, “*You can’t do this alone,*” will scrape her insides, “*You can’t do this alone,*” will remind her, “*You can’t do this . . .*”

But sometimes the voice that resounds in the heart is louder than the one that sounds in the mind. Sometimes words are

whispered from soul to soul, from sphere to sphere, and can be heard only when we hold still, sit still, keep the wheels beneath us from turning, and listen for what lives beyond the veil. Such whisperings, such transparent and flawless communication, will come to Mary today, will set a diamond wall around the part within her that is brilliant and divine; will be here soon, will promise her, will say, “*My beloved child, there is no other way.*”

And suddenly she will have enough of looking. She will not finish watching the women as they amend what she was unable to do correctly herself, as they tug the seat of Esther’s garment bottom over her nakedness. Nor will she endure witnessing them untangle the stranglehold that the garment camisole has upon Esther’s neck. Instead, Mary will close her eyes, seal them against the nightmare before her, preferring to imagine herself many miles away and many years ago, standing in a temple at the base of a mountain, a temple made golden by the lights which shine at night, wearing a slitted gown and feeling the press of fingers at her hip as a blessing and an anointing is bestowed. She will return in her mind to the small trailer, to the fold-away bed, and to the memory of that first set of tiny pink fingers kneading her breast while a matching tiny, pink mouth drinks in life. She will look up in both places, in both times, and beside her she will see her husband. Of course she will see Lance. But before him, before her, she will always see Esther. 



BABEL

In those days men sometimes saw angels frowning from arches of the upper rooms, and because I had made bread for them I went that morning before the workmen made their way. But I found only dust

and feathers (and strangely a grey sole fish and a shell and a weed that grows only in the salt of the sea). I sat long and prayed, but never did they come to me; there was only

a tapping of the ropes, and somewhere: locusts. As I descended, the howls of my city shook sparrows from the rafters, rung our tower like the hull of a broken bell. We do not go to that place any longer;

it tatters like some ghost of a dream: each moon more star, each day more sky: it crumbles like all we were. I am still learning all my lover’s words. This one, I am shown, is love. This one, I am told, is God.

—BRIAN LONG