

# Such Simplicity

## *An Editor's Essay*

Faith. Most people say they have it, which I take to mean, they do have it. I had said for many years that I had no faith, which made my close friends laugh at me and say, of course I did. They could see what I could not. Many years ago, I spotted the poet Robert Bly walking with some younger men through HemisFair Park in San Antonio, Texas, about 10:30 at night. I thought this to be a strange event. I waved hello, not wanting to impose, but Robert Bly called to me, "Have you seen your father lately?" I had not. "Go find your father," he said, and walked on. His injunction represents, as you likely know, one of Robert's missions. It began, for me, an examination of faith.

Examinations of faith infuse nearly every line of this edition of *New Letters*. Imagine the boys in Rashaan Alexis Meneses' story "The Others Are Strangers," going to meet their father for dinner in another town. Imagine their deepest, yet unstated question, *In whom can we have faith?* Callum and, to a degree, his brother Ewan, want to know if their father is that person. Literature tends to expose the spiritual longings of its characters and, as such, allows us a look at ourselves. Somewhere, deep in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, we read, in Willis Barnstone's translation, "If you reveal what is within you, what you have will save you."

I am one, however, who needs help. I need examples, guides. Lao-tzu says in the *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, "I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion." Yes, I need all of those. "There's only one rule I know of, babies," proclaims Vonnegut's Mr. Rosewater at the hospital nursery, "you've got to be kind." At my father's funeral recently, I shook the hand of person after person my father had, one way or another, saved. That's the word they used, saved—he found them jobs, repaired their plumbing, drove them to the hospital, paid for and delivered groceries. Of all this, I choose to be a celebrant.

"There is light within a person of light," Thomas adds. I proclaim early in this magazine my faith in the poet Maxine Kumin. I proclaim her light. In this issue, also, poet Linda Pastan proclaims her faith in a spiritual father, the poet William Stafford. "How complicated such simplicities are," she writes, suggesting the need for Stafford's own examples of patience and compassion. Faith can be fragile.

The Vedanta philosophy says that our expectations are our greatest source of suffering. I once overheard the poet Lucille Clifton counsel an adolescent girl, suffering from some failure she saw in her mother. "You must have been born believing that your parents have to be perfect," Clifton said. To be in heaven, the Vedas say, is to realize God in our own consciousness. Define God for yourself, of course, but literature helps us by exposing consciousness in others, by allowing us to participate in the moral complications of those outside of ourselves.

Recently, in Seattle, I had the joy of meeting for the first time the writer Brian Doyle. Our conversation drifted to the virtues of Oregon wines, especially the pinot noirs; but, as we talked, I thought mostly of how the character of his stories and essays have lifted my spirit over the years. He often writes of religious people, as in his story featured here, but not for the religion, for the people. They struggle among the complicated simplicities; they err, sometimes badly, and seek to regain not only their faith but the state of being in which others can have faith in them.

Look in this issue to the story by Diana Friedman, whose character seeks a father but who must learn, also, to know a father when he sees one; or to the interview with Janice N. Harrington, where she discusses faith in the person of her mother. I say *the person of* because her mother is a person first, complicated and worthy. We must get that. Literature shows us how to look beyond the complications to the essential perfection of our best selves. That is what we try to do here at *New Letters*, not only to have faith but to offer faith.

—Robert Stewart