

Essays for a time of isolation

Jordan Kisner writes about seeing the world and the self.

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Thin Places

Essays from In Between

By Jordan Kisner
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

In a late March essay in the *New York Times*, Jordan Kisner, writing ostensibly about her canceled book tour, describes “sitting at a table near a window and looking out at a row of peony buds slowly pushing up from the blank ground.” The house has been infiltrated by ladybugs, and, she notes, “our stillness is made more noticeable by their motion and endless proliferation, by the constant fluttering of wings. It hasn’t even been a week and we’re already bored.” The article puts to the purpose of COVID-19 sense-making many of the themes that recur throughout Kisner’s new collection of essays: prayer, generational inheritance, the act of gazing at something. Boredom. Curiosity. Change.

The architecture of Kisner’s essays—which echoes, among others, that of Leslie Jamison—is the architecture of articulation. As in many personal essays, Kisner comes to see the world in concert with coming to see herself. Or she comes to see herself in concert with coming to see the world.

A trip to Laredo to report on a debutante ball gives way to a reflection on Kisner’s mother’s Mexican American heritage. A report on an evangelical church in Montauk that’s “named, rather baptismally, WashOut” turns to a memory of

what it feels like to be a Christian, or what it felt like for me. There’s a membrane between imagining God’s love as a thought experiment and experiencing it as absolute reality, and if you slip across it, the entire known universe shatters and reassembles itself to be more whole and beautiful than you thought was possible.

A journalistic immersion in the office of an Ohio medical examiner (including a forensics training course where Kisner learns, among other things, to distinguish between a wound made with a kitchen knife and one made with a piece of glass) yields to a poetic rumination on Kisner’s own mortality: “Is this what I wanted? To feel my own fragility . . . much more acutely than before?”

The most satisfying of the essays then turn outward again. The Ohio forensics piece concludes with two “death investigators” bearing witness to the dead. Kisner observes that they seemed “never to forget someone who’d passed through their morgue. They were always saying, ‘Oh, I remember him,’ even about cases they

hadn't personally attended." She adds, "They're not always reverent about it, but there's a specificity with which people in this line of work, at their best, are always in a state of address," assuring their dead that the living remember them.

Christian faith is one of the volume's abiding themes. Kisner has a summer-camp conversion in her childhood, but by adolescence it fades. Years later, as a grad student at Columbia, she finds herself nursing a broken heart, unexpectedly falling in love with a woman, and going back to church. Kisner tells herself the church attendance is just "for research" and seems startled that it "came to occupy a larger portion of my time than was strictly necessary. . . . My bargain with myself was that I would sit off to the side or in the very back; I wouldn't sing and I wouldn't pray." All of this—the love of a woman, the distressing draw to church—makes Kisner feel "completely, surprisingly unmoored in my own life." It's even more unsettling that friends and acquaintances keep telling her how well she looks, how grounded she seems.

Kisner makes no great recommitment to church: "I went to church and then stopped going to church." Rather, she tries to pray, an attempt that seems to her no more and no less than "obediently talking to the ceiling." She eventually makes a turn to what might be called a repristination of the quotidian:

Sometime in the months and years after I lay on my bed talking to the ceiling, I turned my attention away from whatever epiphany I thought I was owed and toward the feeling of standing on the subway platform, the impatience and dumb helplessness and blind trust inherent in this daily exercise. There's a beauty to this state, waiting for whatever, looking for conviction or clinging to it.

Yet she maintains an abiding interest in Christianity, as expressed in some of the sites she selects for journalistic exploration: the church in Montauk, lifestyle blogs run by Mormon mothers, the Shaker colony at Sabbathday Lake in Maine.

I found myself irritated by Kisner's choice of textual interlocutors, which include very familiar snippets from Pascal (e.g., the eternal silences of infinite spaces) and Weil (a line from whom Kisner either retranslates or misquotes as, "absolute, unmitigated attention is prayer"). There's a subgenre in which quotations like these are so frequently quoted that they seem clichés. I'm quibbling here, obviously. But it's precisely because Kisner elsewhere demonstrates range and incisiveness that I wish

she'd worked these theological memes over a bit. I want her to show me something in them that I don't already know how to see.

Yet there's much I admire in these essays, not least Kisner's facility with language. For instance, in an essay organized around tattoos (but not in the deepest sense about them), she describes a photograph of a 19th-century tattooed woman named Olive Oatman. In the photograph, Oatman's "collar is tatted and her hair is parted down the center, twisted back behind each ear." Kisner could have described that collar as "trimmed in knotted lace" or "lace-edged." But, no: *tatted*, aurally recalling the essay's putative topic.

One of the deepest pleasures in this volume is its sequencing—something that's crucial to turning discrete essays into a book without forcing a single narrative arc. Kisner follows the associational logic of a poet. She shows us, through order and diction rather than on-the-nose thematic ligatures, the links and leaps and divots among the book's 13 essays.

Consider how her essay "Shakers" reaches out to several of the others that surround it. Kisner's treatment of the "strange beauty" of Shaker design extends toward other visualities that dot the book. Kisner writes in another essay about dresses that are "more beautiful than they need to be" (an aesthetic claim haunted by theology, if ever there was one). More politically, she notes that in San Diego, the wealthy and the native-born own all the beachfront property: "They own the right to see the horizon." More metaphorically, near the end of the book she recognizes that when you're in love, "everything, even you, looks different."

More subtly, the essay on Shakers ends with the wonderful image of Kisner at a gas station dancing a small Shaker homage dance. The next essay begins, "There's a section of the Fishlake National Forest in Utah where the quaking aspens seem to take a little more space for themselves." Her sojourn among the Shakers allows Kisner, and us, to notice the aspen "leaves tremble furiously even in a slight breeze." The inscape of the aspens, Gerard Manley Hopkins might say. That's something I am glad to notice.