Drop: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Drop.”

Readers Write in the March 10, 2021 issue

(Photo by Ohmky on Unsplash)

In response to our request for essays on the word drop, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **Clock** and **Quake**—*read more.*

I woke up underwater. Icy cold. Lungs useless. Instinctively, I kicked and flailed. My backpack, clothes, and boots held me down. Why was I having such a hard time getting to the surface? I didn’t know that I had broken a wrist, cracked my skull, and fractured two vertebrae in my neck.

I had been fly-fishing the Pack River in the northern Idaho backcountry with my friend John. The day was warm and sunny; hemlocks with their shaggy boughs arched over the water. Sunlight dappled through the needles, illuminating every rock in the gin-clear water.

We were fishing a pool near a waterfall with a steep drop. I caught one small trout and then leapfrogged rock to rock, climbing upstream. At the crest of the falls, I waded out into the river. The second I stepped with my left foot, I knew I'd made an unfortunate choice. My feet flew out from under me on the slippery granite. Then nothing. I don't recall being catapulted over the falls, tossed like a rag doll in a washing machine.

I had been knocked unconscious.

But at the base of the waterfall, the cold water startled me awake. I crawled out of the river, panicked, panting, grasping at the rocks. My hand reached for my forehead—my glasses were gone. But I could clearly see blood on my palm. I drifted in and out of consciousness, waking again to the sound of roaring water. I was shivering. How long had I lain there?

"Are you hurt?" It was John.

"I don't know," I said. I actually hoped I could get back to catching trout.

"We better get you to a hospital. Do you want to wait here while I go get help or try to walk out with me?"

We were in a steep embankment, a good half mile from the road. It would be a while before John returned. I thought about grizzly bears. I feared being left there in the wilderness, alone.

So we bushwhacked out of the canyon. John led the way, pushing away unforgiving branches, fallen limbs, and feral undergrowth. I limped along behind him, a wet T-shirt to my forehead to stem the flow of blood. When we reached the dirt road, I feared I would black out again. John helped me into an ATV. My body relaxed just a little, knowing I was in his capable hands.

Hours later I lay in a hospital bed, my arm in a cast, my head bandaged, and my neck in a brace. I wondered, how did I lose my balance? Did I misjudge the water's depth or the strength of the current? Hadn't I remembered I was wading into a river at the crest of a waterfall? What if the water had not awoken me? I could have drowned.

"God drew me out of deep water," says the psalmist (18:16). "God rescued me." Like Peter when he began to sink under the waves, I was saved from death—but it

was more than that. The Latin word *salvus* is the basis for both “save” and “salve.” Being saved means being healed, rewoven into relationship with God—it’s more than simply being given more time on this planet. What was I being saved *for*? What would this experience teach me about what’s next?

I don’t know how Peter experienced life after he was saved. For me it was as if I had been standing apart from nature, in it but not of it; but now, having been taken by its power and tumbled down the frothy white chaos, I was part of creation itself. I realized that I am an animal, vulnerable to nature, gravity, and mortality. The Gospels teach me that such moments are the gateway to embracing our radical dependence upon God.

William Sloane Coffin said, “God provides minimum protection, maximum support.” This is what the Pack River taught me—the river that mauled me, that saved me.

Peter Luckey
Lawrence, KS

I was a toddler when I began working the assembly line in my father’s western Indiana drug trafficking business. We sorted and stuffed kilos into the fiberglass carcasses of kiddie rides. Hydraulic horses were dropped off at warehouses in flyover country while Oldsmobile trunks carried bricks across America. My father, known in those parts as “King,” christened me with a parakeet-lookout street name: “Budgie.”

Drug drops were sacramental to my father. A wayward marine and a recreational therapist, he drove a black hearse with crucifixes superglued to the dashboard. He quoted Leviticus and palmed a stone Mary Magdalene like a mezuzah when he entered and exited our trailer.

When my parents met at an Ohio psychiatric hospital, their attraction was built on faith. Televangelist Robert Schuller had been their North Star. So in 1980, when they were told they needed warmer weather to conceive the baby girl they’d prayed for, they packed a U-Haul and headed west for Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral. They settled in East LA and believed in miracles.

King believed in an almighty God who had tasked him with anointing the poor, mentally ill, and bored with the balm that became the Corn Belt's demise. He cruised through the war on drugs like a Mack truck, accelerating ahead of the law using his Fuzzbuster, his White skin, and his sociopath charm. My memories of my dad are a film reel of me standing guard while he charismatically wooed dealers and clients in random depots, junkyards, lobbies, and living rooms. But he also quoted Levitical law to me in the King James, insisting his daughter be raised pious, no matter how the bundles of cash landed on our scratched-up kitchen counter.

Daddy knew the value of an hour. Sixty minutes of Sunday school could teach his preschooler, "B-I-B-L-E, yes, that's the book for me!" and we earned $2,400 on a quick drop after worship. And like church, transit had its own commandments: No written notes. Open eyes. Mean face. And watch for plain-wrapper pigs (unmarked cop cars). Joints were chain-smoked during drops, and I had special instructions to give every 18-wheeler the middle finger. "We're on a tight schedule," he used to say, stroking his rabbinic beard with clenched teeth, mocking pretentious country club elitists.

I failed only once in those years of trafficking, when our boat of a car met midnight antlers as Madonna's "Crazy for You" played on the radio. I was supposed to be on the lookout, but I didn't see the deer coming—a blemish in my drop record. It disappeared as quickly as it hit, leaving a mangled mess of metal. We were deep in the rural routes of Indiana in the days before cell phones. King wouldn't have called the cops anyway; it was good no one had seen us. We cruised home slowly.

My parents divorced when I was six, and drug drops became a point of marital contention. I began to navigate two distinct parental visions for who I would become: Budgie, my dad's fledgling drug dealer, was poised to inherit his empire; Revy, my mother's evangelical Christian do-gooder, would be a future minister. I desperately wanted the approval of them both, but the fighting fervor King instilled in me that kept us alive on drug drops was a liability in my mother's southern world. Survival looked different to her; it looked like people-pleasing. I swam in each of their realities, their clinical diagnoses of schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder, a Venn diagram of enmeshment and codependency.

I was not surprised when, at 36, I found myself an orphan, free to establish my own integrated identity. By then I had been both Budgie and Revy. Who would I be now?

When I was born, they almost named me René, which means “reborn.” My parents had terrible habits, but they had fervent faith. They believed in miracles. So do I.

J. Dana Trent
Raleigh, NC

I served a 12-month tour of duty with the US Army in Vietnam. I was scheduled to return to the United States on April 9, 1971, assuming no capriciousness from the army or adverse intervention by the local Vietcong. That February, I received notice that I would be going home 30 days early. In army parlance this was called a drop.

I had enlisted in the army ahead of the draft, planning to go to Officer Candidate School. But OCS and I were not a good fit. I was in the same battalion that produced William Calley, who would go on to kill 22 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians in the M˜yỹ Lai massacre in 1968, and I quickly came to understand how it had done so. Much to the relief of all concerned, I resigned from OCS. My next stop was the First Cavalry Division in Biên Hòa, South Vietnam.

I came home in 1971 with a collection of colorful medals and all my body parts intact, finishing out my army commitment working in administration at the New Orleans induction center, a plum duty assignment if ever there was one.

One fall morning, walking in uniform to my office, I was accosted by a young woman, dressed in the ’70s fashion—long dress, sandals, round granny glasses. She planted herself two feet in front of me and asked, “Have you killed any babies today?”

I looked at her for a long two seconds and replied, “No . . . but the day is early.”

We left each other in silence.

All these years later, my time in Vietnam is still a part of me. Not in the challenges many Vietnam veterans have faced—post-traumatic stress, depression, alcoholism, homelessness, night terrors. Not in time spent in VFW halls telling war stories. What I carry with me is that young woman’s question.

The answer, had I been in a mood to give one, was that I had done no such thing—certainly not that day, as she well knew, and not ever. I cannot know whether she wished me ill, whether she truly thought I and all the other soldiers were baby

killers. I don’t know whether she was at heart a caring person grieving the evils she saw her country committing or if she was merely caught up in the antiestablishment mood of the times. I do know that I reflect on that young woman’s question still.

Why did we think it our mission to go to war on the other side of the globe to prop up a corrupt, incompetent government? How did we think that was worth one American life, let alone 58,000? How have we looked back at the millions of Vietnamese people on both sides who died and concluded that we should do it again elsewhere?

Have we killed any babies overseas today? Probably not in the sense she was thinking. Have children died today due to sanctions we have imposed, embargoes we have established, borders we have sealed off, heartless dictators we support? My heart tells me the answer might well be yes.

I got my drop. I left Vietnam intact, mentally and physically, 30 days early—30 days that may have saved me from the fate of 58,000 others. I left knowing that I had not committed any of the brutalities implied by the young woman’s question. But I also left knowing that my presence—and my fellow citizens’ acquiescence—enabled the very thing she asked about.

If she is still alive, I wish her well.

Ed Barrett
Pratt, KS

From Frederick Buechner, *BEYOND WORDS*:

It gave Noah a nice warm feeling to see the rainbow up there, but in another way it gave him an uneasy twinge. If God needed the rainbow as a reminder, he thought, that could mean that, if someday God didn’t happen to look in the right direction or had something else on his mind, he might forget his promise and the heavy drops would start pattering down on the roof a second time.

Jane said it would be a private interment at the national cemetery. I knew she had no children, so I wondered if it might be just the two of us, but five of her late husband's caregivers showed up. I told Jeff's life story as best I could, but the caregivers were the main event.

"Jane and Jeff slept in adjoining twin beds," said one of the young women. "Jane would get up first. She'd start the coffee, then she'd wake Jeff with a dozen kisses. They'd really go at it. Jane would go fetch the paper, and then she'd come back for seconds."

At the end of the proceedings, the cemetery director blew in, charging through the chapel door, clearing his throat in case we missed his big entrance. He took the tightly folded triangle of a flag and placed it in the widow's hands. Then, with way more emotion than was warranted from a complete stranger, he told Jane how this flag was presented with "the thanks of a grateful nation." About the time he brought up the president she interrupted him to say, "Where are his ashes?"

"We'll get to that," he said.

Then he launched back into his speech pretty much from the beginning so as not to miss a word. Jane let him finish this time and then spoke again: "Where are his ashes? I want to see his ashes into the ground."

The director told her that just wasn't done anymore. With 17,000 veterans dying each day, there wasn't time to give them all a truly proper burial.

"It's important to Jane to put her husband's ashes into the ground herself," I said.

"I'll have to make a call," he said.

Less than three minutes later, an army green golf cart pickup carrying a load of fresh topsoil pulled up the chapel drive. We took our time ambling over to the grave site. The groundskeeper, wearing a smart green jumpsuit, dug the hole neatly, a foot square, about three feet deep.

The director asked Jane if she'd like to kneel.

"Jane can't kneel," I said.

As if by prior agreement, we formed a burial team. One of the caregivers got behind Jane, holding her around the middle. Another similarly held onto the first. I knelt in front of Jane, putting a hand under the box. The director grabbed a handle and Jane held the other. We all went down together, with the rear caregiver leaning way back to balance us all.

Jane, always very slim, doubled over completely. She was able to get Jeff's ashes maybe six inches into the hole, but that was the absolute limit, so we all just hung there—in the grave but not at the bottom. I was supporting Jeff's mortal remains from below, the two caregivers were leaning back at about 30 and 45 degrees. We must have looked something like a Marx Brothers' impression of the flag raising on Iwo Jima.

All of us who loved Jane knew what had to be done, but if we had to hang there with her until dawn, holding her and Jeff's ashes in a suspended position, we'd have done that rather than speak up.

It was the director who, bless him, broke the spell. "Ma'am," he said, "you're just going to have to let go."
In about ten seconds Jane found whatever grace was necessary to do that. No wail, no tears, just a world of respect for 60 years lived with a lovely man, someone who was her whole life.

After "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," the man in the jumpsuit filled the hole and placed the square swatch of turf on it, just so.

Scott Dalgarno
Salt Lake City, UT

The first time I dropped my daughter Amy off at sleepaway camp, I almost burst into very public tears. There she was, ten years old, throwing her duffle bag up onto a top bunk where dozens of previous campers had written their names on the wooden walls. The camp was only about two miles from our house, but still. She'd be gone a week.

I met Amy when she was eight years old and living in foster care. The state had decided that family unification wasn't a goal in this case. Her current foster parents

were aging and couldn’t commit to caring for her until she was an adult. Social workers assumed that no one would want to adopt her because she was “so old.” They planned to enroll her in a boarding school.

But Amy desperately wanted a family, and I couldn’t bear the idea of her growing up with no one to tuck her in at night or paint her bedroom pink or hold her hand as she traipsed house to house on Halloween. I wanted to adopt her.

So here she was, under my care, even though no one would call me maternal. She was another year older, being dropped off at camp where she would take rocketry and go backpacking and fishing. And I was driving away, definitely not crying.

In August 2020, I dropped Amy off at her college dorm. The lead-up felt like a long time, but then when we pulled into the parking lot, everything happened so quickly. Within five minutes, poof, she was on to her next adventure, and I was an empty nester.

A week later she got permission to come home and pick up her cat. I drove her back to campus, and she seemed so happy, living as a college student away from her parents but with one of her favorite creatures there to keep her company. That evening, though, she called home crying so hard I almost couldn’t understand her.

Another student who worked with her in one of the university restaurants had tested positive for COVID-19, so Amy and several others were being moved into quarantine. She was worried she’d exposed me and her other mother, my wife Sandra, whose immune system is already compromised. If only she hadn’t come home that day of all days to pick up her cat! I reassured her that if she had to be quarantined, I was glad she at least had her cat. We would all likely be okay.

That night, though, I could barely control my own emotions. She’d been so happy just a few hours earlier. All I wanted to do was run to her, pull her in for a close hug, protect her—exactly what I could not do. She would be quarantined for 14 days, as physically separated from me as she could be.

I’d dropped her off at college knowing I would miss her, knowing I’d worry about her safety and hope for her happiness, but I hadn’t really considered how life can change so quickly. As I’m writing this, I think we’ll be among the lucky ones—so far neither Amy, my wife, nor I have exhibited any symptoms. In a few more days we’ll see each other again, and I’ll be so very grateful to drop my daughter off and watch

her take those same steps again.

Lynn Domina
Marquette, MI

I was born in the Netherlands and lived through the German occupation during World War II. I was a teenager in 1944, when the war was reaching its end. We were hopeful that after the D-Day invasion we would be liberated, but the Allies' progress stagnated at the Rhine River. They tried to cross at the Dutch town of Arnhem, but the attack failed. Morale in Holland sank to its lowest level.

During the battle of Arnhem, the Dutch railway workers tried to help the Allied offensive by going on strike. The Germans retaliated by cutting off all food supplies to the occupied part of the Netherlands. It was the coldest winter on record in Western Europe, creating a double misery.

Widespread famine ensued. There was simply no food, and to compound the situation there was no transportation. Trains were not working. Buses, taxis, and private cars could not be used because there was no gas. Bicycles had no tires. It was dangerous for men to venture out of the house. Fortunately, coke was still available, and we had an AGA cooker, so we could still cook what we could find.

My mother and father were resourceful and had money. They scrounged for food with some modest success. My father's firm had about a dozen employees, and our family served all of them at least one scant meal a day.

We cooked and ate tulip, narcissus, and crocus bulbs—they taste like onions. Hyacinth bulbs were eaten in extreme moderation, because they are somewhat toxic. There were sometimes some potatoes available, and we managed to get some wheat flour by bartering. Any bit of ground meat, usually rabbit, we extended with sawdust to make croquettes. Occasionally we got legumes and could make soup.

To this day, when I hear people say, "I'm hungry," or "I'm starving," I can't help thinking, *You don't know what you're talking about.* During the occupation, no one got adequate calories. I was old enough not to have serious sequelae, but my younger brother never really recovered—he was stunted. My mother had edema from protein malnutrition. Both my sister and I lost significant weight. Of course, the

survivors of German concentration camps were even worse off than we were.

The war dragged on. I was hungry, and I despaired that it would never end.

One day I was in my room on the third floor of our house. I had not heard yet that the Americans had begun air-dropping care packages with food. A package landed in the gutter of our house, within reach of my dormer window. It was the first real food our family had eaten in months. That airdrop restored my hope for a future.

Jan van Eys
Nashville, TN

My family and I were a long way from home, it was late at night, and we were very, very lost. We had the directions to the bed and breakfast, but we had gone down five or six different streets, the names of which we could not read, let alone pronounce.

It had been a long travel day. Our youngest child was asleep in the car seat. The older two had already gotten cranky and then lost steam. My spouse, who has a knack for finding amazing places to land in foreign countries, was eerily silent.

We ended up at the bottom of a steep road. It was clearly not the right road. There were a couple of houses perched on embankments and a retaining wall that overlooked the sea. We needed to turn around in what appeared to be a narrow overlook and head back up the perilous incline we'd just descended. But I could not see where the retaining wall ended, and I had no idea whether I could get the car turned around. I thought of reversing back up the hill, but the car was a stick shift and I worried I'd burn through the clutch.

I did my driver's ed three-point turn and got the car pointing in the right direction. I asked my spouse to get out to see how much room I had. When he did, he started waving furiously. I rolled down the window, and he stepped gingerly toward me. "Don't go one inch farther back! There is a massive drop-off down about 40 feet. I think a fence is missing or something." A childhood nightmare came back to me: a car going across a bridge that had split in two, hurled over the edge to nowhere.

Quick thinking: Put the car's hand brake on. Get the children out of the car and away from the drop-off. Do not look over the edge. Drop into your seat and with a steady

hand on the gearshift and even steadier feet on the clutch and accelerator ease out of the situation.

With an inch of leeway, I was able to move the car away from the brink and ease it up that steep bank. I stopped at the top of the hill and turned around to see the two older kids running toward the car with flushed faces, clapping furiously. Our little one was safely draped over her daddy's shoulder.

When everyone was back in their seats, we were all suddenly quiet, as if each of us realized the gravity of the situation and the grace of having each other.

Every life has a precipice encounter, even if it's not a steep drop-off in an unknown village on a dark night with my children's eyes shining and only my hand and foot to prevent a car from dropping into oblivion and taking me with it. Looking into those great chasms, there will be plenty of reasons to think that nothing can bring us back from the brink. But I learned that a steady hand and a trusting heart can keep us from dropping into the unknown.

Lucy Forster-Smith
Chicago, IL

No matter how late the hour when we arrived, my grandparents were always on the front steps to greet us. And so was Bridget, their white Labrador.

Bridget was utterly obedient, responding to commands with alacrity. She was also fiercely loyal. She spent hours at the edge of my grandfather's vegetable garden. While he planted, watered, weeded, and finally harvested lettuce, radishes, cucumbers, and other earthly treasures, she listened patiently to his musings.

Once he saw Bridget in pursuit of a rabbit. The rabbit fled through the vegetable garden; Bridget dashed around it so as not to trample the new seedlings. She slept beneath the cribs of napping grandchildren. She stood watch at the water's edge while we swam. Only when an adult took a child's hand did she stand down and enjoy a swim herself.

On summer mornings my grandmother, with Bridget by her side, went to the henhouse to gather the day's eggs. One morning, back in the house, Bridget paced about my grandmother and nudged her persistently with her cold nose. Annoyed,

my grandmother told her to sit. She did not. She pawed at the floor and looked up at my grandmother, her wide eyes demanding a response. My grandmother finally understood. She cradled her hands beneath Bridget’s mouth and said softly, “Drop it.”

Bridget gently dropped the uncracked egg into my grandmother’s waiting hands.

Kate Baker-Carr
Brookline, MA