Threshold: Essays by readers

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

Readers Write in the June 29, 2022 issue

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In response to our request for essays on threshold, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **hinge** *and* **hunt**—*read more.*

The Lord called, “Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Here I am!” (1 Sam. 3:4). A lover from my 20s told me that story. He loved it. *Here I am!* He (the lover) once accused me of narcissistically staring at myself in his toaster while I ate spaghetti. Really, I was just looking for myself. Here I am.

That was the year I read books about Buddhism, a tradition in which the threshold is a pretty big deal. I would pause in doorways and think, *Threshold*. I’d stand in the hallway after brushing my teeth and think, *Here I am. About to go from this to that.*

I’m a poet, and the threshold is a big deal in poetry as well. Larry Levis writes of the poet as threshold, as making a journey into the wilderness, into the unconscious, to a place beyond the social. This setting out is what, ironically, allows the poet to reconnect with the self and with others, to come back again and report from that place. “At the moment of writing,” he says, “what is ‘out there’ moves inside.”

It feels to me like this is what life is—a constant becoming, standing in doorways on our way from this to that.

In some ways, I have had no choice but to embrace a constant state of becoming. Even the question of where I come from has always been vexed. My mother became pregnant with me at age 18 and then followed her husband’s family to Lawrence, Kansas, where she walked around the hilly landscape of that college town in homemade maternity minidresses. Six weeks after I was born, we returned to North Carolina, but I continued to move every few years throughout my life, following in tow as my young mother finished college, went to graduate school in another hilly college town in Tennessee, then moved us overseas for a few years, until we landed back in Kansas, where I went to college. I continued this nomadism on my own, moving through the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast, making circles.

After I finished my PhD, I taught for a year at a private high school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Another teacher—an older woman with the energy of someone in touch with what she had to offer—once asked me where I was from. I explained to her why that was one of the most challenging questions for me, that I’d lived so many places, that I felt most alive in a city surrounded by art and artists and the parade of humanity right out there on the street, but that I also longed for peace and solitude and a place where I could hear crickets at night. As I talked, feeling like I was floundering for a foothold, her eyes lit up, and finally she said, “You have so much to offer these students. Your varied background is a valuable part of what you bring to your teaching.”

Her reframing was just what I needed to begin doing what Dolly Parton told us all to do: “Find out who you are and do it on purpose.” I’m trying to do it on purpose. I’m trying to offer that as part of my service to the world: living my life in relation to the poetic witness of becoming.

Joanna Penn Cooper
Durham, NC

Addicts speak of bottoming out, and as a recovering addict, I am more familiar with that abyss than I could wish on anyone else. And yet my compulsion at last forced me into a blessed deliverance.

My story took its critical turn in a locked mental health unit, where it struck me that nothing I could do would ever please me or anyone else. I'd had a fine job teaching literature, some career successes, and above all a wonderful family to whom I was less and less a husband and parent and more and more a servant to the aptly named demon rum. I know what it is to be possessed.

On the last night, please God, of my alcoholic career, my firstborn son and daughter got me to the ER. Without two days of sedation, I might have gone mad in the ward to which I was assigned. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ancient mariner speaks of the "Nightmare Life-in-Death." He is cursed with an inability to pray until he has offered adequate atonement: natural and spiritual realms alike remain inaccessible to him, even as he continues technically to be alive. For whatever reason, I thought of that poem and saw how, though I'd taught it countless times, I'd never truly known what Coleridge meant by this term.

And then some power eternally beyond me must have decided I'd lived out my own penance. Just at the third midnight in that ward where I lay in shame and despondency, I heard a terse, colloquial sentence: *It'll be alright.* A prosaic voice delivered it. There were no thunderbolts, no flashes of light, but in the instant, a great weight lifted from my body and I stepped into the realm Paul spoke of to the Philippians: the peace that passes all understanding. I'd stood momentarily on a threshold; having arrived as of that night on this side of it, by the grace of God, I've had no compulsion to use alcohol or any substitute for a long, long time.

Skeptics have asked me how I know that voice was "real." I have an answer that is both exact and, to them at least, vague: I heard it. What I felt surpasses comprehension, but it recalled for me the sense of disembodiment I had on hearing the great church music, low and high, of my childhood. That too was indescribable back then; it had nothing to do with theology.

Nor does it now, in truth. Theological inquiry absorbs and stimulates me. Yet whatever shape it takes, theology (like anti-theology and all modes of criticism) is a human construct, and my faith is not in humanity. It's in a more exalted energy,

without which I would either be drunk or drugged or, likeliest, dead.

I pray a lot. I pray almost constantly, more out of church than in. I pray for those still suffering substance abuse. I pray for saints and strangers, and I pray above all for family and friends, to whom I have been restored by the agency I call God, whose embodiment I was taught early on and am still persuaded to regard as the Christ.

But don’t ask me about recondite issues like the afterlife. In one sense, I feel as though I am living one now.

Sydney Lea
Newbury, VT

She doesn’t remember she just said that. She doesn’t remember I just said that. She doesn’t know the answers to questions doctors devise: Who is the president? What day is today? When is her birthday? She doesn’t know how to get home or even remember who I am.

There is no use trying to set her straight. She is not able to be set straight—even for a moment. That effort is only for me, to orient myself in what I believe reality to be.

My dear mother suffered greatly prior to her death right before her 103rd birthday. Her mind had failed her, but her body would not give up. As she struggled to die, I was sitting on her bed with my arm around her. She had said several times in the past few days that she was miserable. But as she leaned her small strong body against me that day, she spoke.

“I want to sit on your lap,” she said. I was disturbed. How could I possibly lift her onto my lap? Then, she said again, “Jesus, I want to sit on your lap.”

I’ve thought about that many times since then. I’m not much for sentimentalism or romanticism. Building and believing religious fantasies about life or even life after death doesn’t work for me anymore. But I believe she was in that interior world with Christ—what we might call the valley of the shadow of death, the one he had built with her over almost 103 years. She was on the threshold of paradise, and I was still back in the sightless world with only glimpses now and then of its existence.

Gala Van Eaton
Norman, OK

From Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast*:

“Please,” he whispered. Still flat on his back, he stretched out his fists as far as they would reach— “Please . . .”—then opened them, palms up, and held them there as he watched for something, for the air to cleave, fold back like a tent flap, to let a splendor through. . . . Two apple branches struck against each other with the limber clack of wood on wood. That was all—a tick-tock rattle of branches—but then a fierce lurch of excitement at what was only daybreak, only the smell of summer coming, only starting back again for home, but oh Jesus, he thought, with a great lump in his throat and a crazy grin, it was an agony of gladness and beauty falling wild and soft like rain. . . . Maybe all his journeying, he thought, had been only to bring him here to hear two branches hit each other twice like that, to see nothing cross the threshold but to see the threshold, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world’s tongue at the approach perhaps of splendor.

“I’m going to have comfort care,” announced my dad with a smile, as if someone had handed him a warm blanket and cocoa. The stomach cancer, held at bay with surgery and chemotherapy, had reappeared—this time in his liver. Palliative care was the approach he chose next as he prepared to cross the threshold of death. He would not get more chemotherapy, radiation, resuscitation, or a ventilator. He would receive pain management, antacids, laxatives, and whatever would ease his body.

I accepted his decision, but I was distressed, wondering whether he would survive to walk me down the aisle. Would he attend my wedding in person or in spirit?

Three months later, the bridesmaids, the flower girl, and I were in the narthex when I heard that my dad had arrived at the church. The van driver rolled him in to greet all the guests before groomsmen showed them to their seats. He shook hands with everyone, grinning widely.

My brother pushed Dad's wheelchair down the aisle beside me. I held his hand in one hand and my bouquet in the other. This threesome was not how I pictured walking down the aisle, but I was overjoyed. When the minister asked, "Who gives this woman in marriage?" my dad said, "My wife and I do!" so loudly it was as if he had used his last breath to say, *Finally!* Indeed, I was a 50-year-old bride.

At the reception, the barbershop chorus led everyone in singing "Happy Birthday" to my dad as his grandson presented him with a chocolate cake with a few candles, not all 86. He delivered his toast proudly. During the father-daughter dance to "Sunrise, Sunset," we sat together. With deep delight, we celebrated each other.

The evening we returned from our honeymoon, we visited my dad. "I like the welcoming committee," he said. I didn't know what he meant. My husband pointed upward, explaining the portal was open and deceased relatives were gathering at the threshold. But Dad looked so alert and so comfortable, I doubted he would pass that night. I kissed him. "I love you. I'll see you in the morning." But the next morning we got the news. We had a funeral to plan.

Theresa Yuschok
Chapel Hill, NC

I woke early on February 14, 1970, my wedding day. The temperature outside was 20 degrees below zero in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. I arrived at the church around 9 a.m., coiffed and ready to go. But there was no groom.

The night before, Curt dropped me off at my house before taking my car to join his parents at the motel. Now he was missing. I was sweating and pacing when at last the front door of the church blew open and he entered, bringing gusts of snow and cold with him. He was late because my car wouldn't start. I had warned him that he needed to warm the car up during the night—I even made him a bet that it wouldn't start otherwise. I won, and I put the penny in my shoe.

The pews were full of relatives and friends. The two pastors officiating the wedding were ready and in their places. With my eyes on Curt, I took the first step across an unseen threshold. The last thing I remember as I proceeded down the aisle was the thought, "This is it, there is no going back," as I moved forward to meet him.

Nearly 40 years later, on September 9, 2009, Curt had not been feeling well but said he was fine. At 11 p.m. he left to deliver newspapers to businesses and rest stops. As we did every night, we hugged and said, “I love you.” I told him to be safe and come home to me. At around 2 a.m., he called from a Perkins to say that something was wrong. I could hear his breathing, and it was not good. We hung up so he could call 911. Our last words to each other were, “I’m scared,” and “I’m scared, too.”

When I arrived at the parking lot, Curt was in an ambulance and EMTs, police, and firefighters were moving in and out of the vehicle as they attempted to restart his heart. As I approached the ambulance, a tall, skinny police officer came to meet me and put his arm around me. Shortly, firefighters, with heads down, left slowly and quietly while the police moved away. One of the EMTs was sitting in the ambulance with his head in his hands. I stepped away from the police officer and moved toward the ambulance, because I knew Curt was gone.

It was such a clear night. I had been looking up at the sky. It seemed like the Big Dipper was touching the trees. Curt and I once chose the star that formed the lip of the Big Dipper to be “our star.” It was a point of light we could both see even when thousands of miles separated us. As I looked up, I felt the shock float down and wrap around me like a blanket. I welcomed it as a gift of grace.

I climbed into the ambulance and sat next to Curt while the EMT told me the story of Curt’s last minutes. Then I covered his head with the sheet and left the ambulance.

I stood alone for a moment, deeply aware that I was at a crossroads. I would no longer walk with my husband beside me. Yet I knew I was not alone. I took a deep breath and stepped over another threshold. Once again, I thought, “This is it, there is no turning back.” I walked toward the restaurant where angels dressed like goth kids surrounded me, hugging me as they told their story of Curt’s last few minutes.

Susan L. Peterson
Lino Lakes, MN

“I can’t guarantee you will make it through this surgery. In my 30 years of practice, I have never seen anyone with such a stunning family history of postsurgical stroke,” said the anesthesiologist as I was about to undergo major surgery for ovarian cancer.

The possibility of my crossing life's final threshold appeared imminent. Obviously, I did not cross it that day. The surgery went well. Following a subsequent round of chemotherapy, I am now classified as NED (no evidence of disease), the ovarian cancer term for remission.

As I live in this liminal land, the final threshold still looms on the horizon. My cancer, although treatable, is not yet curable. Because I realize my own mortality, I often feel at odds with a society so unnerved, terrified, and ultimately paralyzed by fear of death that it cannot even find words to express the threshold of death through which, like the threshold of birth, we all must pass. In polite society, we are joyfully born but we never die, we just pass away.

The psalmist boldly sings, "Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting life is" (Ps. 39:4). The ancient Israelites knew, as I do, that even though such thoughts evoke dreaded emotions that activate our existential anxiety, accepting our own mortality liberates us to appreciate life more fully and to love the living saints in our lives more deeply.

Our culture blinds us with a denial of death born out of fear. When we remove these blinders, however, and clearly see that one day each of us will pass through that final threshold into the abundance of God's grace and love, we are compelled to live more fully and courageously during all the days, months, and years with which we are blessed.

Jane Duffield
Pittsburgh, PA

Our great western odyssey, my 11-year-old grandson and I called it—a summer road trip to see four national parks in Arizona and Utah. Over 11 days, we had bonded over short hikes and late-night ice cream suppers.

We arrived at Arches National Park, the last of the trip, at noon. The temperature had soared to 107 degrees, so we waited until 7 p.m. to begin our long dreamed-of trek. Even then, we were drenched in sweat before taking a step.

I began to wonder if I, having just turned 70, would have the stamina to make it. But Jack kept encouraging me, "You can do it, Granddaddy!" as he held out a hand to

pull me along. The last section of the trail was the most perilous, a narrow ledge chiseled into a sheer cliff and curving upward around it. One careless misstep, and we could fall 15 to 30 feet. At points, Jack and I, both afraid of heights, were nearly paralyzed.

But there, at the edge of a stunning precipice, was Delicate Arch. Mysterious, mystical, it looked like it had been constructed by a primordial race of Titans.

For what must have seemed like an eternity to Jack, we gazed at it in silence. Then words tumbled out of my mouth: Doors. Gates. Portals. Thresholds. Littoral zones, where disparate dimensions, like land and sea, earth and heaven, touch. I asked, “Can you imagine, if you jumped through the arch, what would be on the other side?”

Here was liminality staring the two of us straight in the face—that discombobulating disorientation one feels when going through the metamorphosis of a major life passage. In the case of my grandson, who bears my name and my father’s nickname, he was about to enter the sometimes scary wonderland of adolescence. In my case, I had just begun to roll down the frightening slope of old age. Progeny recapitulating ancestry.

As we contemplated the arch, I commented, “You and I are like Janus, you know.”

“Janus?” His brow furrowed.

“The Roman god of thresholds. He has two faces. His old face looks backward into the past. His young face looks forward into the future. More and more, I’m going to need your young eyes to help me see future possibilities.”

Jack, whose emotional intelligence is off the charts, quickly added, “And I will need your old eyes to help me see the lessons of the past.”

The first stars would soon appear through the arch’s opening. I thought of St. Paul seeing through a glass darkly. I told Jack, “I want you to go beyond seeing things only as they are and lamenting, ‘Why?’ to dreaming of things that are not yet and demanding, ‘Why not?’” He said nothing, but this boy on the edge of young adulthood put his head on my shoulder.

A holy darkness descended on us, and from the revelatory we walked back down into the ordinary.

John A. Wright
Austin, TX