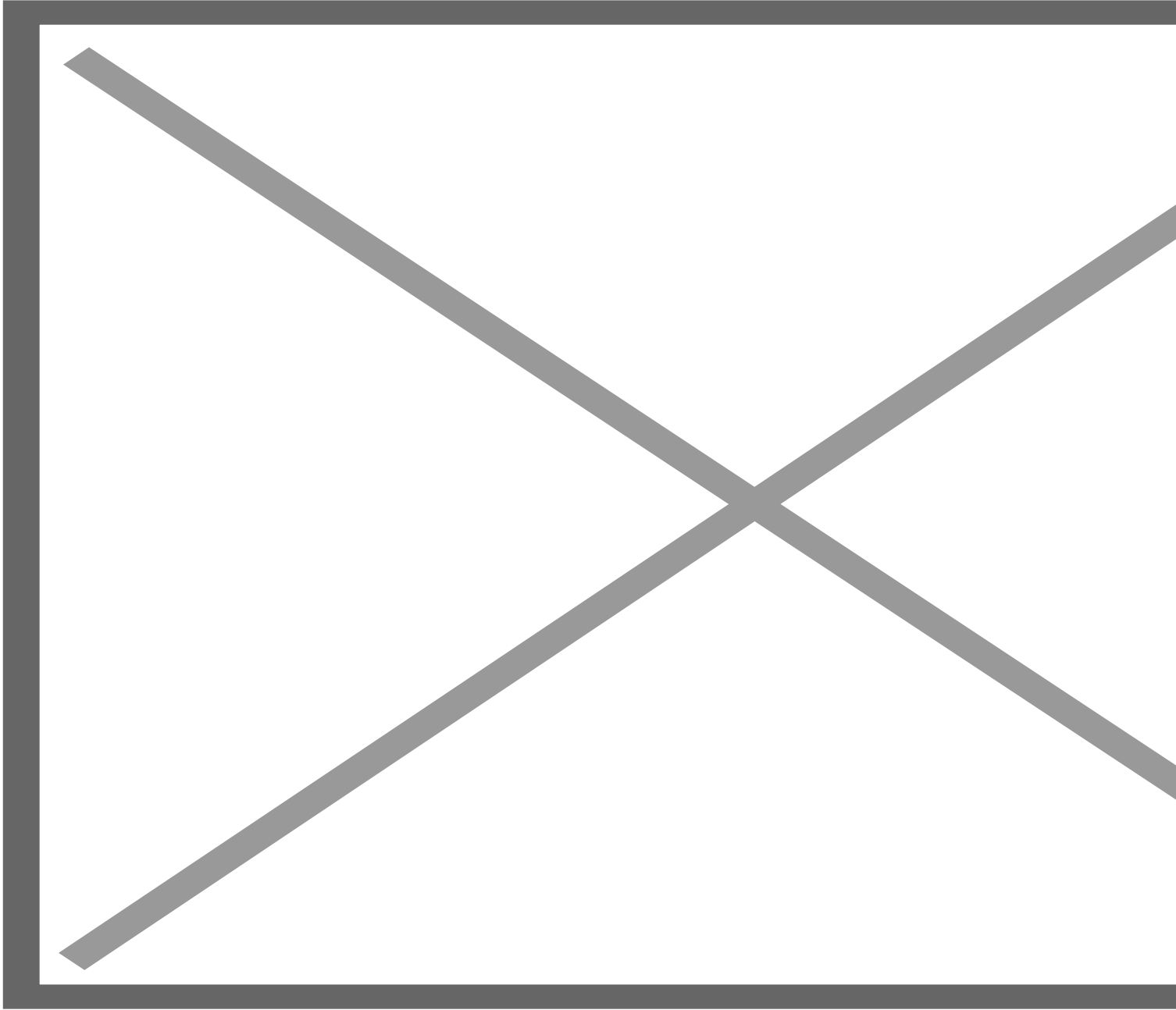


Essays by readers: Fall

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

Readers Write in the [June 2026](#) issue

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“Thy kingdom come . . . on earth” is what we are saying. And if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the Hell out?

—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

I see the long-ago mother’s day column in my mind’s eye—clear and bright, distinct and wise. I go to the local library and mention the author, Erma Bombeck, to the gray-haired librarian, who quickly nods her approval and starts looking in the stacks. She finds the wildly popular humorist’s collection *Forever, Erma*. I open the book and immediately spot the column. “That’s it.” The librarian smiles.

When the column—titled “Mothers of Disabled Children”—was first published in 1980, I was working at the *Omaha World-Herald*. I clipped it and sent it to my mother, Olive, with a Mother’s Day card, letting Bombeck speak for me. She imagines God doling out patron saints to mothers, but what saint do you give to mothers of “handicapped” kids? She makes several smart points: that such a mother has to be a bit selfish, that “she’ll never survive” if she can’t separate herself from her child, that she shouldn’t “have too much patience” or “she will drown in a sea of self-pity and despair.” And who is her patron saint? God answers with a smile: “A mirror will suffice.” My mother’s friends often compared her instead to a diamond chiseled after years of intense heat and pressure.

Every life starts with more questions than answers. Mine started with only questions. I was born in without a left leg at the knee, no left arm at the elbow, and with only one finger and a useless, tiny stub on my right hand. My birth date—October 2, 1950—was the day Charlie Brown made his first forlorn appearance in the funny pages, but there was nothing funny about my situation. Would I be able to walk? Go to school? Hold a job? Feed myself? Get married? Have kids?

My aunt tells a story from when I was about six months old. I was learning to crawl, but I kept falling down, getting up, and knocking my head on the floor. “*Ach!*” said my grandmother, “How can you let that little boy do that to himself?” She went to pick me up.

But my mother stopped her. “If you pick him up,” she said, “make sure you’re around when he’s 30 to do the same thing.”

There were few resources or support groups for parents of “handicapped” kids at that time. Dr. Spock’s book had been out for a few years, but my mother didn’t need his advice. “There are no rules for raising a handicapped child,” she often said, “so I threw out the rule book.”

Often people with disabilities are portrayed either as heroes who overcome incredible odds or as cases of extreme hardship. I went to good schools, played many sports well, married, had two smart and athletic kids, and traveled widely as a journalist. But it all could have turned out very differently with different parents.

In 1980, my mother responded to the Bombeck column I sent her. “Don’t worry,” she wrote to me, “you were a joy to raise.” (She also had a great sense of humor.) Two months later, I received a panicked late-night call from my father: My mother had died of smoke inhalation in a house fire at their home. My father escaped through a window and tried to reenter the house to save her, but there was nothing he could do.

I was a few months shy of 30 years old at the time. As my mother predicted, I fell, hit my head on the floor—and got up.

Daniel Cattau
Park Ridge, IL

Shortly after I graduated from college, I fell for a scam. The country was in the midst of a recession, and work was scarce, even with a bachelor's degree. It already felt like I was in on some joke, but I didn't realize I was the punch line. Still, something in me was resilient and hopeful. I searched for jobs online and came across an opportunity I knew I was well qualified for. Soon enough, though, something felt off. I had been exchanging emails and checks with a supposed employer who always had a reason I could not start work yet. By the time I figured out what was happening, my bank account was depleted and overdrawn by thousands of dollars.

"You have to be not just book smart, but street-smart," my father advised me after I received a collection letter from the bank's lawyer. I took offense at this comment from my seemingly disappointed father. I had been living in Chicago for years. My small-town family avoided cities; I thrived in them. After the scam I did all I could to save money—biking instead of driving, dumpster diving to supplement food. I was barely making rent and could not imagine how I would repay the money. It was obvious to me that I had street-smarts; I had just made a mistake. Now I could spend the rest of my life trying to prove my father wrong.

The bank showed me no grace. My father advised me not to pay: "It will only be on your credit for seven years." Thanks, Dad, but that would not work for me. I explained that, at my age, I could not afford to have bad credit. The bank wanted its money back, and it would get it. I got on a payment plan.

It was a shameful thing for me, but I was determined not to let it ruin me. I kept all the documents, receipts, letters, and payments from the scam in a large envelope; it was a reminder never to fall to the whims of desperation again. It took me about six years to pay back the bank. Then, to my relief, it was all over—or so I thought.

Years later, I received a letter about a lawsuit against Western Union. Could this be real? It offered me less than I had lost in the scam. I sent in a counterclaim, along with all the documentation I had kept. A couple of years later—about a week after my father's death—I received another letter. My stomach sank, and a little voice within me said not to get too hopeful. I took a breath and pulled the contents from the envelope. There was a check for the full amount of my counterclaim.

I cried. And the realization hit me: I did not deserve the return of the money. All this time, I had treated grace as something that could be earned. Like the bank, I was keeping a ledger. I used to think my fall happened the day I was scammed. Now I think the real fall occurred over the long years I spent believing I had to earn my way back from the loss. The money that was returned to me just after my father died felt less like reimbursement and more like quiet mercy—an unexpected reminder that while the world keeps careful accounts, God does not.

Logan C. Lovelace
Morganton, NC

"I can't sleep," says the small one. Who can blame the child snuggled under the fluffy blanket mound? Soft light peeks in the curtain—not too bright, but enough to illuminate shadows on the wall. Salt trucks plow forward, grumbling against the earth. Metal shovels ting against sidewalks. Boots crunch on the sidewalks as people walk by. Funny how snow is so silent when it falls but causes such noise later. Crème brûlée ice forms atop the fallen snow: Tap, tap, crack! Violent whirls of snowblowers erupt in the background. Crashing. Scraping. The snow is

white noise to me.

I breathe in deeply. The winter has been difficult. Snow began in November and seemingly hasn't stopped. We had a couple weeks of brown muddy yards, but since December we've only seen the ground a handful of times. As soon as the snow melts, flooding our Michigan basement, more snow falls, inches upon inches.

We can't complain (but we do!); this is winter in Michigan. The temperatures are dropping now, and it is only mid-January. February and March are often my difficult months, when I trudge through darkness even though the days are supposedly growing lighter. Perhaps my anxiety is misplaced, but I know that the beauty of the snow fades into a black hole of waiting for spring. Maybe this year it won't happen.

For now, I sit with the small one, tucking them in a little bit more, sighing and smiling. The noises of the snow are at it again, keeping children awake. Yet I know sleep will fall upon this one quickly, for they played with their sibling in the snow earlier in the day: snowballs and snow forts and Ice Capades. The exhaustion will set in, and I give a silent prayer of gratitude that they still enjoy laughter in the snow—maybe the greatest noise snow produces. They are dangerously close to growing out of playing in the snow, but for now the white sparkles bring them joy, which brings me delight.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Alma, MI

He lived like he was dying. He seized each moment every day. He was a genius, and his actions were always trying to keep up with his brain. My children's father, my former husband of ten years, my old friend, died in an airplane crash 15 years ago. He was the pilot of that ill-fated plane. His wife and her sister-in-law, his only passengers, died along with him.

I think a lot about Taylor's last minutes. Was he awake, asleep, drunk? Did he try to right the plane? Stop the fall? I've sat beside him on countless flights. He had more than 3,500 flight hours, and I've seen him right his plane from nosedives many times. When renting a plane for the first time, a pilot has to stall the plane to show his flying ability. I've been in the air with Taylor on these checks as he slowed the plane and let it drop to a low altitude, then pulled it out of the fall. It's a scary feeling. You are falling, and your stomach lurches into your throat. Your palms are sweaty and your heart races. Outside the context of a flight test, stalling is considered an undesirable phenomenon in aviation textbooks, a phenomenon that occurs when the wings produce increased air resistance and decreased lift and that can lead to a crash. In a stall the plane is under too great an angle of attack, its nose pointed too high relative to its direction.

Stalls often occur at takeoff or landing, when the plane is flying more slowly. Taylor's Cessna crashed just four miles short of the small airstrip just outside his destination of McComb, Mississippi. He had almost made it home.

He was probably flying at close to stall speed when he made the steep turn approaching the landing strip. Aviators say that rapid reduction in speed after passing the critical angle of attack means the wing doesn't have enough lift to balance the plane's weight. If one wing stalls before the other, that wing will drop and the plane will fall out of the air. The ground waits below.

Taylor had an appointment with the ground. Part of me always knew that he was destined to die before he reached old age. He soared high—always pushing the envelope in every part of his life—and he fell hard. Everyone who really knew him was not surprised that his cause of death was “traumatic injury from aircraft

crash.”

He was never afraid to stall. Skydiving was a favorite hobby of his. He water-skied until his shoulders ached from holding the ropes. He snow skied the black diamond slopes in Colorado, often taking the ungroomed and uncharted back of the mountain. He drove recklessly. His side mirror was always hanging off his car from backing into stationary objects. He took risks all the time.

He was also a heart surgeon—a career that involves life-and-death decisions. He was never afraid to crack open a patient’s chest to get to the heart. He was a pioneer in new surgical techniques, like keyhole incisions for heart surgery in the early 1990s and, more recently, robotic surgery.

Some might say he was self-destructive. He was intense both in life and in death. He was an alcoholic, and he was drinking again. His second marriage was in trouble. He was deep in debt. He had two planes and carried mortgages on four houses he couldn’t afford. He had been recently fired from his job. He had hit the figurative bottom. Then he hit the ground.

Harriet Riley
New Orleans, LA

Last September, after nine months of talking and praying over the possibility of a move, we drove away from our home. Every conversation had brought us closer to taking this step we never intended to take. We wrestled and second-guessed even as the car left our assigned parking spot, embarking on Google Maps’ shortest toll-free route to our destination.

For three months before we left, we culled. Our goal: to be as lean and flexible as possible for whatever came next. Friends insisted we didn’t have much to begin with. An 1,100-square-foot townhome imposes limits. But we had filled nooks and crannies with more belongings than we needed to keep.

We had lived in Albuquerque for 20 years. We loved the sunshine, big skies, and warm weather—four seasons with extended summer. We loved the geography and took full advantage of having the Sandia Mountains as our backyard, enjoying regular exercise on foothill trails and weekend hikes to the crest. We loved nurturing relationships over decades to build real community. And we loved exploration: habitually seeking solitude and sabbath in remote campsites on public lands by navigating color-coded maps.

We drove away from New Mexico with carefully selected tangibles of our four-decade marriage packed into a small trailer hitched to our Honda Passport. We returned to the Chicago metropolitan area, the backdrop of our childhoods and first half of our life together, to help aging parents with significant transitions. This was, and is, a temporary destination with no end in sight.

Chicago initially greeted us with unseasonable warmth: People were still going to the beach in early October. Although delayed, the fall foliage offered a spectacular show. Then a sudden storm system covered the area with snow—more snow in just a couple weeks than had fallen in the previous year. Three consecutive arctic vortices followed on the record snowfall’s heels. Perpetual gloom kicked in. Twenty years ago we had left the Midwest to follow the sun, and we returned just as the sun took its annual vacation.

There has been no need to acclimate, given our long muscle memory. Our reality is disconnected; everything seems familiar, but we don’t belong. We have deep roots here, but we’re as barren as the trees around us. We lack motivation to invest in local relationships because we’re transient. We gave up our routines, our

community, our privacy, our independence. Our packed-up life remains in bins stacked against my mother-in-law's garage wall.

We neither imagined nor planned to spend any portion of our autumn supporting my in-laws' winter. Our faith affirms that God is with us in this wilderness. God, more than Google, routed us here. And though it feels like our own journey is on hold, we've just taken a detour on a map that's still unfolding.

Sandra Bauman

Sioux Falls, SD