



On Earth As It Is

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Something to be Desired

Diana Joseph

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

HOME

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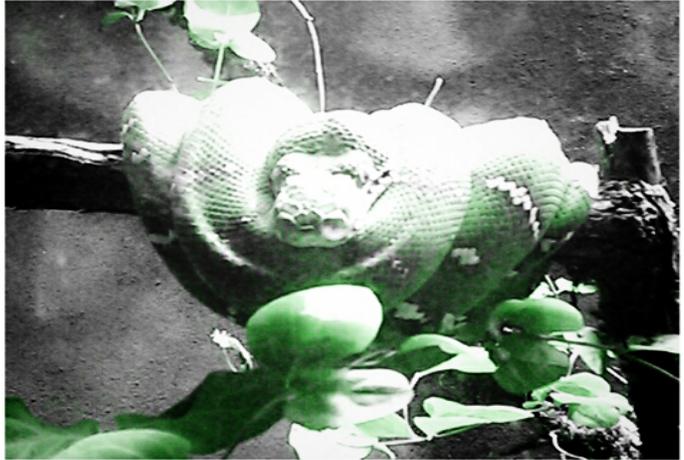


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Something to be Desired

Diana Joseph

Maynard Prine of Reynold's Creek, West Virginia was fierce in his faith, an obedient servant of You, Lord, Your miracles, Your Mysterious Ways. It was Your mandate that my father take up the serpent, that he handle the flame. This man was not afraid.

He did not always consider himself religious. The Prines are a clannish people, hot-headed and iron-fisted, opportunistic, his father and three uncles fighting both sides of the war, Rebel then Union, but Maynard found his work in the woods. His arms were thick and strong from swinging the axe and pulling the saw.

His face was not a handsome one, broad across the forehead, pointy at the chin, lines around his eyes and mouth, crooked teeth. It surprised him that a woman sat across the supper table from such a face and looked up at it in a bed. But one did, and because of that he appreciated his wife. It was for her that he'd give over the better part of a Sunday to the church, his wife and children taking up nearly the whole pew while he stood at the back, near the door.

But then came the day You called upon him, spoke to him, showing him what he had overlooked, though it had been there all along.

Maynard Prine was thirty-three years old that day. He'd been hired to cut a clearing at the McCallister's, a place for them to make a pasture, raise a barn. He was feeling poorly, feverish and fighting the peakedness that comes with a spring flu. He was sawing limbs from a felled tree, the sun on his neck, the sweet smell of oak, the movement of the blade through the branch, and a sense of watching himself from outside himself work the blade, the saw's back and forth movement, all of this granting no distraction from his aches, no peace at all, when he heard Your Voice calling upon him. Look around you, boy, You said.

Ain't there my Glory in what you see?

What Maynard saw were crosses. Like the three on Calvary. An infinite number of crosses. Crosses made from two sticks or two branches or two fallen trees. On the ground, in the horizon, the underside of leaves, reflected in the creek. Two blades of grass bent into the form of a cross, two strands of hair on his horse's mane. Two dandelions twisted into a cross. There was a cross on a butterfly's back, and the shape of a dragonfly is a cross. Maynard caught a glimpse of Him, Your Son, darting behind a tree, a figure gentle and homely, raggedy and wild, His beard long, His hair long, lines on His face and strips on His back, bleeding from His wrists, and Maynard felt he knew Him. He felt as close to Him as kin--brother, cousin, uncle, friend--and his sickness was gone.

When one is called upon, there's not good in pretending he hasn't heard. Maynard Prine had no doubt. That was the day he lay down the saw, and his brown hair went pure white, and he was seized by the spirit for the first time. Maynard laughed the holy laugh. He knew joy. He gave himself to You that day, and from then on he brought to light your Word. Preaching and witnessing. Fasting and healing the sick. Drinking deadly liquids and casting out devils. Taking up the snake.

He was dead at forty-six years of age. In the hours before his passing, Maynard Prine preached to more than a hundred. He rejoiced, he wept and prayed, the spirit moving on him, moving his arms and legs for him, the dance of grace, his heart filled with Your glory. He never thought to be afraid.

Not even when the rattlesnake struck. Heavy and rough-skinned, stocky and long and beautiful, the timber rattler first struck Maynard's skinny neck, then his hairless left arm.

Those parts of his body swelled, and where the teeth went in, the skin went black, and the blackness moved up his arm and down his neck. Maynard went sweaty and cold, clammy and pale. Some in his flock said the doctor ought be gone for, but Maynard's wife Niddy Mae put down her foot saying whether her husband lives or dies can be determined only by You. She'd received a series of premonitions shown to her in the bottom of her coffee cup; witnessed by her in the mound of dirt in a flower pot; seen with her own two eyes in the withers of smoke swirling in the air from her only son's rolled cigarette. What Niddy Mae saw in the cup, the pot, the smoke, brought with it a headache, the worst one, its flashing pain a bolt of lightning behind her eyes.

It's said that at the moment of my father's passing, my mother was touched, blessed, and from that moment on, she's been speaking the language of Adam and Eve.

Maynard and Niddy Mae Prine begat six daughters, pretty maidens of fine figure and face, though thought by their husbands to possess caustic tongues and closed-up legs. Those girls are hard on man but righteous before You. I am the Prines' seventh child, the only son, the wild one. I love Saturday night better than Sunday morning. I think whiskey quenches as good as water. In my affections, floozies stand equal to my mother, and the call of a whore remains as powerful as a wife. The battle being waged is for my soul.

I set out early this morning, pulling the stout black and white cow called Maggie on a rope behind me, showing the heifer the way to the McCallister's roan bull. It's a far piece to walk, through the hollow's marshy meadows and dark woods that smell of dark smells, of mushrooms, of rotting logs, fallen spruce and maple and pine. The air smells like cow, like the heat from her body, like my own sweat. Patches of shade and patches of light, a rustling in the brush. Knotty tangles of root reaching out of the ground. I touch Maggie's neck, her side, her hip.

My mother isn't wrong to worry and she isn't wrong to pray. She has spent a lifetime praying for me. Niddy Mae weighs less than a hundred pounds and stands smaller than five feet, but her power is not in her size. She told me she knows them, she feels them, all the demons from Binsfield's list awakening, stretching their arms and kicking their cloven feet and looking around the chambers of my black heart. What is good

in me holds conflict with what is wicked. I have been earning my keep since five years of age, whittling axe handles and digging ginseng, robbing bee trees of their honey and selling trout to lumber camps, and now at age fourteen, I know it is time to put aside the ways and things and thoughts of children. I know myself able to do a man's work and able to provide a woman pleasure. Walking to town a restless and bellowing cow, one as fat as a pet cat and just as lazy, is a task for women or for a boy. But I'll do it if it means coming down from where one hills rises out of another, those tight places, so narrow only a creek can pass through. I'll do it if it means escaping the weariness of my mother's prayer, those nonsense words spilling from between her chapped lips. And I'll do it if it means just a moment of relief, of distraction, from the ache, from the thump thump thump of the thing in my pants. I'm waiting for You to show up. I'm waiting for my mandate, my sign.

Diana Joseph is the author of *Happy or Otherwise* (Carnegie Mellon Press, 2003) and *I'm Sorry You Feel That Way: The Astonishing But True Story of a Daughter, Sister, Slut, Wife, Mother, and Friend to Man and Dog* (Putnam, 2009.) She teaches in the MFA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

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