


the only reason you
want to go to heaven
is that you have been
driven out of your
mind (off your land
and out of your lover's
arms)



clear seeing inherited
religion and reclaiming
the pagan self

Unto the woman God said: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.—GENESIS 3:16.

In my novel *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug discuss, as all thoughtful humans must, the meaning of God. Shug says, "I believe God is everything that is, ever was or ever will be." Celie, raised to worship a God that resembles "the little fat white man who works in the bank," only bigger and bearded, learns to agree. I agree also. It was years after writing these words for Shug that I discovered they were also spoken millennia ago, by Isis, ancient Goddess of Africa.

In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God—representing everything—and Nature as its spirit. But for a long time I was confused. After all, when someone you trust shows you a picture of a blond, blue-eyed Jesus Christ and tells you he's the son of God, you get an instant image of his father: an older version of him. When you're taught God loves you, but only if you're good, obedient, trusting, and so forth and you know you're that way only some of the time, there's a tendency to deny your shadow side. Hence the hypocrisy I noted early on in our church.

The church I attended as a child still stands. It is small, almost tiny, and made of very old, silver gray lumber, painted white a couple of decades ago, when an indoor toilet was also added. It is simple, serene, sweet. It used to nestle amid vivid green foliage at a curve in a sandy dirt road; inside, its rough hewn benches smelled warmly of pine. Its yard was shaded by a huge red oak tree, from which people took bits of bark with which to brew a tonic for their chickens. I remember my mother boiling the bark she'd cut from the tree and feeding the reddish brown "tea" to her pullets, who, without it were likely to cannibalize each other. The county, years later, and without warning, cut down the tree and straightened and paved the road. In an attempt to create a tourist industry where none had existed before, they flooded the surrounding countryside. The fisher people from far away who whiz by in their pickup trucks today know nothing about what they see. To us, they are so unconnected to the land they appear to hover above it, like ghosts.

The church was donated to our community in 1866 after the Emancipation Proclamation by the daughter of the slave owner. It is "ours" only for as long as services are held there. Few young people have remained interested in the church, and so it has been kept going by one or two elderly women. I have sup-



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byalicewalker

ported their effort to keep the church open by responding to whatever modest requests for assistance they have made. I do this because I respect these old women, and also because I recognize them as the keepers of a personal heritage that is very dear to me. The cemetery with virtually all of my relatives, including grandparents and parents, is just across the way, as is the vetch-covered space where the first consolidated school for black people in our community used to stand. A school my father was instrumental in erecting. I find myself once or twice a year sitting on the church steps, peeking into the windows, or just standing in the yard, remembering.

What I remember is playing tag and hide-and-go-seek with my cousin and best friend, Delilah.¹ She was radiantly black, funny; and fleet of foot, and her mother dressed her in the same airy, colorful summer dresses and patent-leather shoes just the way my mother dressed me. Perhaps she had more pigtails; I had bigger bows. In winter we wore identical maroon-colored snow suits, which served us well in the uninsulated church, which was then, and still is, heated by a potbellied stove. We would grow up and lose touch, and she would barely escape a violently abusive marriage, about which I heard only after the fact. I remember my father huddled with other men outside under the trees, laughing. My mother scrubbed and shining, smiling. We were all on our best behavior, even my incorrigibly raucous brothers who, only at church, managed to be both neat and quiet.

Because we were Methodists, and sang mostly standard hymns, the singing wasn't all that great. I loved it, though, because I liked singing with others—still do—and I was, even as a small child, hum-

bled by the sincerity in the voices of everyone. After we sang any kind of song together, there was nobody in the congregation I didn't love.

Perhaps the singing had been even more sincere a hundred years earlier; legend had it that the former slave owners would stop their buggies underneath the red oak to listen. Sometimes professional gospel singers came down from Atlanta and "turned the place out." They were undisputed queens in their shiny red or blue robes; they shouted at

God as if they knew Him personally and also knew He was hard of hearing. The black stuff around their eyes, which began to run and smear the moment they

began to sweat, was strange to us, as was the fact that they wore, and wiped off, more lipstick in an afternoon than my plain, country beauty mother would own in her life.

My mother, in addition to her other duties as worker, wife, and mother of eight children, was also mother of the church. I realize now that I was kind of a little church mother in training, as I set out for the church with her on Saturday mornings. We would mop the bare pine floors, run dust rags over the benches and wash the windows. Take out the ashes, dump them behind the outhouse, clean the outhouse, and be sure there was adequate paper. We would sweep the carpeting in the pulpit and I would reverently dust off the Bible. Each Saturday my mother slipped a starched and ironed, snowy white doily underneath it.

One season she resolved to completely redo the pulpit. With a hammer and tacks and rich, wine-dark cloth she'd managed to purchase from meager savings, she upholstered the pulpit chairs, including the throne-like one in which the preacher sat. She also laid new carpeting. On Sunday morning she would bring flowers from her garden.

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN ANYONE WHO AMAZED and delighted me as consistently as my mother did when I was a child. Part of her magic was her calm, no-nonsense manner. If it could be done, she could probably do it, was her attitude. She enjoyed being strong and capable. Anything she didn't know how to do, she could learn. I was thrilled to be her apprentice.

My father and brother cleared the cemetery of brush and cut the grass around the church while we were inside. By the time we were finished, everything sparkled. We stood back and admired our work.

Sister Walker, my mother, was thanked for making the church so beautiful, but this wise woman, who knew so many things about life and the mysteries of the heart, the spirit, and the soul, was never asked to speak to the congregation. If she and other "mothers" and "sisters" of the church had been asked to speak, if it had been taken for granted that they had vision and insight to match their labor and their love, would the church be alive today?

And what would the women have said? Would they have protested that the Eve of the Bible did not represent them? That they had never been that curious? But of course they had been just as curious. If a tree had appeared in their midst with an attractive fruit on it, and furthermore one that they were informed would make them wise, they would have nibbled it.

And what could be so wrong about that? Anyway, God had told Adam about the forbidden fruit; He hadn't said a word directly to Eve. And what kind of God would be so cruel as to curse women and men forever for eating a piece of fruit, no matter how forbidden? Would they have said that Adam was a weak man who evaded personal responsibility for



The author in 1950 at age six.

¹ Not her real name.

his actions? Would they have pointed out how quickly and obsequiously he turned in his wife to God, as if she had forced him to eat the fruit, rather than simply offered him a bite? Would they have said Adam's behavior reminded them of a man who got a woman pregnant, and then blamed the woman for tempting him to have intercourse, thereby placing all the blame on her. Would they have said that God was unfair? Well, he was white. His son was white, and it truly was a white man's world, as far as they could see.

Would they have spoken of the God they had found, not in the Bible, but in life, as they wrestled death while delivering babies, or as they worked almost beyond, and sometimes beyond, capacity in the white man's fields? I remember my mother telling me of a time when she was hugely pregnant and had an enormous field of cotton, 25 or 30 acres, to weed and thin. Her older children were in school, from which she refused to take them; her youngest trailed behind her and fell asleep in the furrows. My father, who was laborer, dairyman and chauffeur, had driven the boss lady to town. As my mother looked out over the immense acreage still to be covered, she felt so ill she could barely lift the hoe. Never had she felt so alone. Coming to the end of a row, she lay down under a tree and asked to die. Instead, she fell into a deep sleep, and when she awakened she was fully restored. In fact, she felt wonderful, as if a healing breeze had touched her soul. She picked up the hoe and continued her work.

What God rescued my mother? Was it the God who said women deserve to suffer and were evil anyway, or was it the God of non-judgmental Nature, calming and soothing her with the green coolness of the tree she slept under and the warm earth she lay upon? I try to imagine my mother and the other women calling on God as they gave birth, and I shudder at the image of Him they must have conjured. He was someone, for all we knew, who actually had said black people were cursed to be drawers of water and hewers of wood. That some people enslaved and abused others was taken for granted by Him. He ordered the killing of women and children, by the hundreds of thousands, if they were not of his chosen tribe. The women would have had to know how little they and their newborns really mattered, because they were female, poor, and black, like the accursed children of Hagar and Ham; and they would have had to promise to be extra good, obedient, trusting, and so forth, to make up for it.

Life was so hard for my parents' generation that the subject of heaven was never distant from their thoughts. The preacher would gleefully, or so it seemed to me, run down all the trials and tribulations of an existence that ground us into dust, only to pull heaven out of the biblical hat at the last minute. I

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The author's parents, Minnie Lou and Willie Lee Walker.

was intrigued. Where is heaven? I asked my parents. Who is going to be there? What about accommodations, and food? I was told what they sincerely believed: that heaven was in the sky, in space, as we would later describe it; that only the best people on earth would go there when they died. We'd all have couches to lounge on, great food to eat. Wonderful music, because all the angels played harp. It would be grand. Would there be any white people? Probably. Oh.

There was not one white person in the county that any black person felt comfortable with. And though there was a rumor that a good white woman, or man, had been observed sometime, somewhere, no one seemed to know this for a fact.

Now that there's been so much space travel and men have been on the moon, I wonder if preachers still preach about going to heaven, and whether it's the same place.

The truth was, we already lived in paradise but were worked too hard by the land-grabbers to enjoy it. This is what my mother, and perhaps the other women knew, and this was one reason why they

were not permitted to speak. They might have demanded that the men of the church notice Earth. Which always leads to revolution. In fact, everyone has known this for a very long time. For the other, more immediate and basic reason my mother and the other women were not permitted to speak in church was that the Bible forbade it. And it is forbidden in the Bible because, in the Bible, men alone are sanctioned to own property, in this case, Earth itself. And woman herself is property, along with the asses, the oxen, and the sheep.

I can imagine some latter day Jezebel in our community (Jezebel apparently practiced a Goddess-centered, pagan religion one of those the God of the Old Testament is always trying to wipe out) having the nerve to speak up about being silenced. And the smugness with which our uninspiring and indifferently trained minister, Reverend Whisby, might have directed her to a passage from the New Testament that is attributed to Saint Paul: "Let women keep silence in the churches." He would run his pudgy finger underneath the sentence, and she would read it and feel thoroughly put down. For God wrote the Bible, she would have been persuaded; and every



Alice with mother, Minnie Lou Walker, 1979

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word, even every word about murdering the suckling babies of your enemies and stealing all their worldly goods, was Truth.

I remember going with my mother to get water from the spring. What is a spring? Many will ask, just as I did. It is a place in the earth where water just bubbles up, pure and sweet. You don't ask for it, you don't put it there. It simply appears. There was one down the hill from our house, in a quiet grove of trees. Someone years before had put a piece of a terra-cotta culvert around it, with a notch in the lip for overflow. We'd dip our battered aluminum buck-

ets in the shallow well, always careful to spot where the crawfish might be hiding, and perhaps sit for a minute before trudging back up the hill. How on earth did the crawfish get in there? I'd ask. They are always in healthy springs, was the answer. Yes, but why? I don't know, that's just the way it is.

But why is that the way it is? Where did they come from? There were no other crawfish for miles around. I never saw them in the creek, for instance, where my brothers and I waded. This was a mystery that was not explained by my mother's final exasperated "God brought them."

I was happier with my father's explanation: "Well you see, these crawfishes used to live over 'round Buckhead, but it just got too goldarn hot on account of all them fires the lumber company makes cleaning up the slag...so they held a crawfish convention, kinda like our revivals, and they resolved to move East. So they traveled and they traveled and one day they came to this place where there was this pretty little girl sitting looking down in the water. And you know crawfish love to be looked at, so..." In fact, neither of my parents knew how the crawfish got into the spring.

On the one hand I could strain to imagine a large white man in a white robe—unfortunately real-life white men in robes belonged to the Ku Klux Klan—lovingly carrying two tiny crawfish down the hill to place them in our spring, or I could fantasize about the stouthearted crawfish pioneers leaving Buckhead with their Sears Roebuck Catalog, crawfish-size, suitcases.

Because of the criminal exploitation inherent in the sharecropping system in which the landowner controlled land, seeds, and tools, as well as records of account, sharecroppers were often worse off than slaves, which was the point. Sharecropping was the former slave owners' revenge against black people for having attained their freedom. It is no wonder that under such complete subjugation and outright terrorism that included rape, beatings, burnings, and being thrown off the land, along with the entrenched Southern custom of lynching, people like my parents sought succor from any God they were forced to have. The idea that as descendants of Africans and Native Americans

and Europeans—Scottish and Irish—on both my mother's and my father's side, they might have had their own ancient Gods, or that as free human beings they might choose a God uniquely perceived by themselves, never entered their minds, except negatively. The "heathen" from whom they were descended knew nothing of salvation, they were warned in church, and any God except the one in the Bible was just another illusion produced by Satan, designed to keep them out of heaven. Satan: always described as evil, in color, black or red. African or Native American? Never admitted to be also a son of God, made

also in the image of his creator, just the shadow side of him. And yet everyone in our family and in our church understood instinctively who Satan was. He was the other side of "the son of God" we always saw in the white people around us. Never did we see "Jesus" among those who insisted we worship him. Only Judas, and every day.

"Pagan" means "of the land, country dweller, peasant," all of which my family was. It also means a person whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the Earth. And this, I could see, day to day, was true not only of me but of my parents; but there was no way to ritually express the magical intimacy we felt with Creation without being accused of, and ridiculed for, indulging in heathenism, that other word for paganism. And Christianity, we were informed, had fought long and hard to deliver us from that. In fact, millions of people were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed, for nearly two millennia, as the orthodox Christian Church "saved" them from their traditional worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in Nature.

IN THE SIXTIES MANY OF US SCARED OUR PARENTS profoundly when we showed up dressed in our "African" or "Native American" or "Celtic" clothes. We shocked them by wearing our hair in its ancient naturalness. They saw us turning back to something they'd been taught to despise, and that by now they actively feared. Many of our parents had been taught that the world was only two or three thousand years old, and that spiritually civilized life began with the birth of Jesus Christ. Their only hope of enjoying a better existence, after a lifetime of crushing toil and persistent abuse, was to be as much like the longhaired rabbi from a small Jewish sect in a far-off desert, as possible: then, by the Grace of His father, who owned Heaven, they might be admitted there, after death. It would be segregated, of course. Who could imagine anything different? But perhaps Jesus Christ himself would be present, and would speak up on their behalf. After all, these were black people who were raised never to look a white person directly in the face.

I think now, and it hurts me to think it, of how tormented the true believers in our church must have been, wondering if, in heaven, Jesus Christ, a white man, the only good one besides Santa Claus and Abraham Lincoln they'd ever heard of, would deign to sit near them.

The water we collected had many uses. We drank it, we washed dishes, clothes, and ourselves with it. We watered our livestock and my mother's vegetable and flower gardens.

On Saturday night everyone in my family bathed from head to toe, even though this meant half a day spent carrying pails of water up a steep hill. The water was heated in the big black wash pot in the yard. On Sunday morning we rose, washed our faces, had a hearty breakfast, and went off to church. As the smallest, I was bathed by my mother, dressed by my mother,

fed by my mother, and wedged into the front seat of our secondhand blue-and-cream Packard between my mother and father. They had worked hard all week for the landowner's benefit; this was their only time of pleasure, of rest, other than an occasional Saturday night film at the local picture show. We spent most of the day in church, listening to the minister, who stood on the carpeting my mother had laid and read from the Bible I had dusted. Sometimes there were wonderful stories: Daniel in the Lion's Den. The Three Wise Men. David and Goliath. The Life of Christ.

Everybody loved Jesus Christ. We recognized him as one of us, but a rebel and revolutionary, consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated against, and going up against the bossmen: the orthodox Jewish religious leaders and rich men of his day. We knew that people who were really like Jesus were often lynched. I liked His gift for storytelling. I also loved that, after Moses and Joshua, he is the greatest magician in the Bible. He was also, I realized later, a fabulous masseur, healing by the power of touch and the laying on of hands. Much later still I learned he could dance! This quote from The Acts of John, from the Gnostic Gospels, is worth remembering: "To the Universe belongs the dancer. He who does not dance does not know what happens. Now if you follow my dance, see yourself in me."

But basically, according to the Scriptures: We had sinned. I did not know then that the root of the word "sin" means "to be." Woman was the cause. All of our life we must suffer just because we existed. Worthless, worthless in. Luckily enough, we would die, but even then only a very small number of us would get into heaven. There was hell, a pit of eternally burning fire, for the vast majority.

Where was hell? I wanted to know. Under the ground, I was informed. It was assumed most of the white people would be there, and therefore it would be more or less like here. Only fiery hot, hotter than the sun in the cotton field at midday. Nobody wanted to go there.

I had a problem with this doctrine at a very early age: I could not see how my parents had sinned. Each month my mother had suffered from what I would later recognize, because I unfortunately inherited it, as bad premenstrual syndrome. At those times her temper was terrible, the only safe thing was to stay out of her way. My father, slower to anger, was nonetheless a victim of sexist ideology learned from his father, the society and the church, which meant I battled with him throughout childhood, until I left home for good at 17. But I did not see that they were evil, that they should be cursed because they were black, because my mother was a woman. They were as innocent as trees, I felt. And, at heart, generous and sweet. I resented the minister and the book he read from that implied they could only be "saved" by confessing their sin and accepting suffering and degradation as their due, just because a very long time ago a snake had given a white woman an apple and she had eaten it and generously given a bite to her craven hearted husband. This was insulting to

the most drowsy intelligence, I thought, noting that my exhausted father often napped while in church. But what could I do? I was three years old.

When I was in my 30s, I wrote this poem:

SUNDAY SCHOOL, CIRCA 1950

"Who made you?" was always
The question
The answer was always
"God."
Well, there we stood
Three feet high
Heads bowed
Leaning into
Bosoms.

Now
I no longer recall
The Catechism
Or brood on the Genesis
Of life
No.

I ponder the exchange
Itself
And salvage mostly
The leaning.

IT IS IRONIC, TO SAY THE LEAST, THAT THE VERY WOMAN out of whose body I came, whose plummy arms still held me, willingly indoctrinated me away from herself and the earth from which both of us received sustenance, and toward a frightful, jealous, cruel, murderous "God" of another race and tribe of people, and expected me to forget the very breasts that had fed me and that I still leaned against. But such is the power of centuries-old indoctrination.

We know now with what absolute heartlessness the male leaders of the orthodox Christian church—not unlike those of orthodox Judaism and Islam—stamped out, generally after robbing them of their land and enslaving them, pagans and heathens, our ancestors and theirs, around the globe: a campaign of such unspeakable cruelty which has lasted for so long, and which still continues, that few have had the heart to encounter it in art, politics, literature, or consciousness until the present era. Thanks in large part to feminism and feminist scholarship, and to a resurgent belief in the sacredness of the feminine, which has been deliberately erased, demonized and disparaged in all major religions. But thanks also to indigent peoples who, though a mere remnant of their former selves, before being invaded by conquerors professing Christianity, have risen up to speak in defense of the ancient Goddess/God of all pagans and heathens, Mother Earth.

IN THIS CONNECTION, HAILLE GERIMA'S EXTRAORDINARY film, "Sankofa," has much to teach us. While being photographed, dancing and carefree, inside the walls

of a "slave castle" in contemporary Africa, a black fashion model for a white, Western magazine, finds herself trapped inside the castle's dungeon, from whose loading tunnels millions of enslaved Africans, from the 15th to the 19th century, began their soul shattering journey to the New World. The woman is horrified to discover she has somehow slipped back into the past and is, in fact one of her own enslaved ancestors. We follow her spiritual development as her own beliefs are denied her and the imprint of Christianity is literally beaten and branded into her flesh.

People of color have been so successfully brainwashed to believe white orthodox Christianity has given us something we didn't already have that we rarely think of what it has taken away. "Sankofa" speaks to this. It also, perhaps for the first time in cinema, graphically depicts the process by which sadists who purport to be Christian have forced their religious ideology on the cultures they destroyed.

IN THE BLACK CHURCH WE HAVE LOVED AND learned in Moses, because he brought the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. As enslaved and oppressed people, we have identified with him so completely that we have adopted his God. But here is another look at Moses, whose wife Zipporah was a Midianite, two of whose children were Midianites, and whose kindly father-in-law, Jethro, was also a Midianite.

From the Book of Numbers, Chapter 31:

And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods.

10 And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt, and all their goodly castles with fire.

12 And they brought the captives, and the prey, and the spoil, unto Moses, and Eleazar the priest, and unto the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the camp at the plains of Moab, which are by Jordan near Jericho. . .

14 And Moses was wroth with the officers of the host, with the captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, which came from the battle.

15 And Moses said unto them, have ye saved all the women alive? . . .

17 Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man.

18 But all the women children, that have not known a man, keep alive for yourselves. . .

25 And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying,

26 Take the sum of the prey that was taken, both of man and of beast, thou, and Eleazar the priest, and the chief fathers of the congregation: . . .

31 And Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord commanded Moses.

32 And the booty, being the rest of the prey which the men of war had caught was six hun-

dred thousand and seventy thousand and five thousand sheep.

33 And threescore and one thousand beeves,

34 And threescore and one thousand asses,

35 And thirty and two thousand persons in all of women that had not known man.

These miserable, grieving, orphaned young women and children ended up as sex slaves, concubines and drudges in the service of the soldiers and the priests.²

Women have little voice in the Bible, and what voice they do have is given them only to illustrate the deviousness, silliness, untrustworthiness, and general insignificance of their sex. The only thing that makes them worthwhile is the birth of a son; they expend much of their energy trying to bring this about. In the whole of the Old Testament, only Deborah, the judge; Vashti, the dignified wife of a foolish king; and Esther, who saves her people; and Naomi and Ruth, the devoted mother and daughter-in-law, stand out as women of substance. One cannot help but feel empathy for the Jewish women of the Bible, however, who had no rights under the law of Moses and indeed were told to stand back when he came down from the mountain with the ten commandments, which, after all were not written for them and were forced to share their husbands and homes with strange, weeping women abducted from other lands.

As to why my mother and grandmother rarely spoke of their spiritual connection to the Universe, we have only to read in Deuteronomy, Chapter 17:

2 If there be found among you...man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing his covenant

3 And hath gone and served other gods, and worshiped them, either the sun, or the moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded...

5 Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman unto thy gates...and shalt stone them with stones, till they die.

THIS IS A GOD WHO DOES NOT RECOGNIZE YOU AS His unless you are circumcised. I don't believe the men in the congregation I grew up in realized this; they were definitely not circumcised. On the other hand, reading the Old Testament, and noting how readily this God would kill you if you were uncircumcised, (Zipporah, the non-Jewish wife of Moses, circumcises one of their "heathen" sons with a rock prior to entering Egypt) I am inclined to believe that the circumcision of women (genital mutilation)—women who wanted to belong, to be accepted by God—has some of its roots here. Certainly the slaughter of nine million

²I am indebted to the fabulous Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her great work, *The Original Feminist Attack On the Bible*, for her insights and, more particularly, for her attitude.

"witches" over from three to five centuries in Europe has its root in Leviticus Chapter 20, Verse 27: "A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: They shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them."

Under this order the "wizards" Moses, Joshua and Jesus, especially Jesus, who raised people from the dead and changed water to wine, would have been burned at the stake in the Europe of the 15th throughout the 18th century.

It is chilling to think that the same people who persecuted the wise women and men of Europe, its midwives and healers, then crossed the oceans to Africa and the Americas, and tortured and enslaved, raped, impoverished, and eradicated the peaceful, Christ-like people they found. And that the blueprint from which they worked, and still work, was the Bible.

BAPTISM

Baptism

They dunked me in the creek'
a tiny brooklet.

Muddy, gooey with rotting leaves,
a greenish mold floating;
definable.

For love it was. For love of God
at seven. All in white.

With God's mud ruining my snowy
socks and his bullfrog spores
gluing up my face.

This is the poem of a seven year-old pagan. The "God" of heaven that my parents and the church were asking me to accept, obscured by the mud, leaves, rot, and bullfrog spores of this world. How amazing this all is. I thought, entering the muddy creek. And how deeply did I love these who stood around solemnly waiting to see my "saved" head reappear above the murky water. This experience of communal love and humble hope for my well-being was my reality of life on this planet. I was unable to send my mind off into space in search of a God who never noticed mud, leaves, or bullfrogs. Or the innocent hearts of my tender, loving people.

IT IS FATAL TO LOVE A GOD WHO DOES NOT LOVE YOU. A God specifically created to comfort, lead, advise, strengthen, and enlarge the tribal borders of someone else. We have been beggars at the table of a religion that sanctioned our destruction. Our own religions denied, forgotten; our own ancestral connections to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their earth-Centered, Female-Reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. And lead, those who are left, today. I further maintain that the Jesus most of us (continued on page 58)

have been brought up to adore must be expanded to include the "wizard" and the dancer, and that when this is done, it becomes clear that He coexists quite easily with pagan indigenous peoples. Indeed, it was because the teachings of Jesus were already familiar to many of our ancestors, especially in the New world—they already practiced the love and sharing that he preached—that the Christian Church was able to make as many genuine converts to the Christian religion as it did.

All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice. Never will Nature require that you cut off some part of your body to please her; Never will Mother Earth find anything wrong with your natural way. She made it, and she made it however it is so that you will be more comfortable as part of Her Creation, rather than less. Everyone deserves a God who adores our freedom: Nature would never advise us to do anything but be ourselves. Mother Earth will do all that she can to support our choices, whatever they are. For they are of Her, and inherent in our creation is Her Trust.

We are born knowing how to worship, just as we are born knowing how to laugh.

THERE IS A SPECIAL GRIEF FELT BY THE children and grandchildren of those who were forbidden to read, forbidden to explore, forbidden to question or to know. Looking back on my parents' and grandparents' lives I have often felt overwhelmed, helpless, as I've examined history and society, and especially religion, with them in mind, and have seen how they were manipulated away from a belief in their own judgment and faith in themselves.

It is most painful to realize they were forever trying to correct a "flaw"—that of being black, female and human—that did not exist, except as "men of God," but really men of greed, misogyny and violence, defined it. What a burden to think one is conceived in sin, rather than in pleasure; that one is born into evil rather than into joy. In my work, I speak to my parents and to my most distant ancestors about what I myself have found as an Earthling growing naturally out of the Universe. I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of

immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive, but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the "religion" by which they must guide their lives.

What is happening in the world more and more is that people are attempting



Wards Chapel, Eatonton, Georgia, Alice's family's church for over one hundred years, and where she was baptized.

to decolonize their spirits. A crucial act of empowerment, one that might return reverence to the Earth, thereby saving it, in this fearful-of-Nature, spiritually colonized age.

AN EXAMPLE OF THIS DECOLONIZATION occurs in *The Color Purple*: Shug, the pagan, discusses the nature of God with Celie, the confused Christian:

Dear Nettie,

I don't write to God no more, I write to you.

What happen to God? ast Shug.

Who that? I say.

She look at me serious.

Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried bout no God surely.

She say, Wait a minute. Hold on just a minute here. Just because I don't harass it like some peoples us know don't mean I ain't got religion.

What God do for me? I ast.

She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman

that love you to death.

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie. You better hush. God might hear you.

Let'im hear me, I say. If he ever lis-

tened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.

She talk and talk, trying to budge me way from blasphemy. But I blasphemy much as I want to.

All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon. But it ain't easy trying to do without god. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain.

I is a sinner, say Shug. Cause I was born. I don't deny it. But once you find out what's out there waiting for us, what else can you be?

Sinners have more good times, I say.

You know why? she ast.

Cause you ain't all the time worrying bout God, I say.

Naw, that ain't it, she say. Us worry bout God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like.

You telling me God love you, and you

ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?

But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to. There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes.

Like what? I ast.

Oh, she say. I can lay back and just admire stuff. Be happy. Have a good time.

Well, this sound like blasphemy sure nuff.

She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found god in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find god.

Some folks didn't have him to share, I said. They the ones didn't speak to me while I was there struggling with my big belly and Mr. _____ children.

Right she say.

Then she say: Tell me what your God look like, Celie.

Aw naw, I say I'm too shame. Nubody ever ast me this before, so I'm sort of took by surprise. Besides, when I think about it, it don't seem quite right. But it all I got I decided to stick up for him, just to see what Shug say.

Okay, I say He big and old and tall and gray bearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted.

Blue eyes? she ast.

Sort of bluish-gray. Cool. Big though. White lashes, I say.

She laugh.

Why you laugh? I ast. I don't think it so funny. What you expect him to look like, Mr. _____?

That wouldn't be no improvement, she say. Then she tell me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. If you wait to find God in church, Celie, she say, that's who is bound to show up, cause that's where he live.

How come? I ast.

Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible.

Shug! I say. God wrote the bible, white folks had nothing to do with it.

How come he just like them, then? Only bigger? And a heap more hair. How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is getting cursed.

I never thought bout that.

Nettie say somewhere in the bible it say Jesus' hair was like a lamb's wool, I say.

Well, say Shug, if he came to any of these churches we talking bout he'd have to have it conked before anybody paid him any attention. The last thing niggers want to think about they God is that his hair is kinky.

That's the truth, I say.

Aln't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say? Ask Sofia, she say.

But I don't have to ast Sofia. I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do.

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.

It? I ast.

Yeah, it. God ain't a he or a she, but a It. Maybe a "us."

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you. She frown a little, look out cross the yard, lean back in her chair, look like a big rose.

She say, My first step for the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning, and rubbing high up on my thigh.

Shug! I say.

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves em you enjoys em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it pissed off? I ast.

Oh, It makes something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

Yeah? I say.

Yeah, she say. It always making little surprises and springing them on us when us least suspect.

Your mean It want to be loved, just like the bible say.

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to get attention we do, except walk?

Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it came from?) Not the little wildflowers. Nothing.

Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. _____'s evil sort of shrink. But not altogether. Still, it is like Shug say. You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall.

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your bow of grins, in your head, and all over the radio. He trying to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and a man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.

But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it.

Amen. †

"The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven," is adapted from a speech given by Alice Walker at Auburn Theological Seminary, April 25, 1995.

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