

CRAB ORCHARD  

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REVIEW

# CRAB ORCHARD

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## REVIEW

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A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE WORKS

VOL. 24 No. 2

*“Hidden everywhere, a myriad  
leather seed-cases lie in wait...”*  
—“Crab Orchard Sanctuary: Late October”  
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*A Note on Our Cover*

This cover features six photographs by Jon Tribble of *Mercy by the Sea* in Madison, Connecticut, during Poetry by the Sea: A Global Conference.

## Goodness

**G**ROWING UP, MY BROTHER AND I ALWAYS KNEW WHERE WE'D BE COME Sunday. It was a given, as certain as the psalms, as assured as the afterlife. At the insistence of our mother, who wanted her children to become good people, he and I would find ourselves at the Methodist church in the center of town, first for an hour of worship service in the sanctuary, then for an hour of fellowship in the building's basement.

We didn't particularly enjoy church, but it wasn't the worst thing either. The sanctuary was ornate and serene, unlike any other place we'd ever been. Our corner of western Maine was paper mill country, where fathers woke early for shift work and the air smelled like rotten eggs, thanks to bleaching agents used to whiten the paper. Situated at the falls of a mighty but polluted river, the town offered only one elementary school but several places of worship. There were churches for Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal residents, but most of the local mill families attended the Catholic church on Main Street, which was bigger and fancier and, from what I'd heard, had more rules.

Our sanctuary, with its arched doorways and cathedral ceilings, was a haven from the rigors of school and work, from blustery New England winters and humid summers. Each Sunday morning, hazy sunshine beamed through stained glass windows, casting the congregation in dreamy light. Golden organ pipes spread out like a giant fan behind the altar. At the pulpit stood Rev. Rothrock, our pastor, wearing an ivory robe and embroidered sashes, with rounded bifocals resting on the bridge of his bulbous nose.

Usually, I had enough patience to endure the first few hymns and the opening scriptures of the sermon. By then, my stomach rumbled. My pre-adolescent body grew weary of the hard pew and my mother's behave-or-else stare. If it were a day for communion—which we Methodists celebrated only once a month, as opposed to the Catholics, who did it every week—I'd be stuck there, waiting for my turn to partake. But if it weren't, the usual excuses would suffice: the need for a cup of water or a trip to the restroom. Because I was ten years old and mostly trustworthy, my mother would occasionally release me to the nursery to help care for the babies and toddlers, but our congregation was dwindling. Manufacturing jobs were moving out of state or overseas, and families were relocating. High school graduates who went away to

college often didn't come back. Some days, in the nursery, there were no little ones to care for at all.

*I have to pee*, I mouthed to my mom. She nodded and whispered *make it quick*. With all the discretion I could muster, I slid to the edge of the pew, then stood and sidled up the aisle, leaving my younger brother behind to fend for himself. He was five years younger than me, born on my birthday—a pest, for sure, but also sometimes my only playmate. On warm days after school, we chased each other through our backyard with cap guns and rode our bicycles up and down our dead-end street. When it snowed or rained, we stayed inside and played with his collection of Star Wars figurines. He was always Luke. I was always Leia.

Row by row, I retreated from the sanctuary, passing old ladies in brown polyester skirts and wrinkled men in dusty tweed sport coats, doing my best to avoid their collective gaze. If they could see my eyes, they might also see my thoughts. Then they'd know what I was about to do, what I did almost every Sunday during church.

As Rev. Rothrock orated from the pulpit, I slipped out the back of the sanctuary and shuffled down a long, dark hallway, past the book-filled office where our pastor wrote his sermons. My mother cleaned the office, along with the rest of the church, one evening a week for extra money, and I would often tag along to help. While she vacuumed, I dusted the shelves and snooped around. The reverend liked to tell jokes, but his private room presented a more pensive image. His books, lined evenly according to height, had leather binding and gold lettering. A framed diploma from seminary school hung on the wall. His desk was tidy and organized, a large fountain pen lying idle in the center.

From the pastor's office, I moved to the staircase leading to the basement, halting briefly to make sure no one, especially my little brother, had followed me. Sometimes he snuck off too, leaving me no choice but to abandon my plan. Other times, our mother gave him Matchbox cars to play with in the pew. Anything with wheels could grab his attention.

I knew what awaited us downstairs. After each service, members of the church gathered in the basement kitchen for Sunday fellowship. There'd be coffee, tea and goodies galore, including special treats we didn't get anyplace else. My mother brought the Bundt cake, a vanilla edifice with cinnamon swirls and brown sugar crumble. Each Saturday evening, I watched her bake it in our kitchen at home, saw her flip the bumpy pan and ease golden cake from its Teflon berth, perfectly formed, perfectly steamy and sweet.

With the stealth and poise of a prowling house cat, I descended the staircase and saw our bounty. Baked goods and casseroles lined the kitchen sideboards. Each potluck contribution was concealed within Tupperware or hidden beneath layers of aluminum foil, but I knew exactly what I'd find inside. Methodists are a predictable and orderly bunch. *Methodical*.

It's right there in the name. Someone would bring the cheddar cheese and Ritz crackers. Someone else would bring the deviled eggs. There would be baked beans in a crockpot and macaroni and cheese with diced ham in Corningware. Mrs. Jones, whose husband, Bob, worked at the paper mill, would make her famous whoopie pies, little dessert sandwiches made of chocolate cake and frosting so sweet it made our teeth hurt.

But the jewel in the crown, what drove me out of the pew and into the basement, was the promise of *crème horns*, those tubular puff pastries loaded with whipped cream—sort of like Italian cannoli but less exotic. Rather than homemade, these treats were store-bought, sold in packages of five or six, and full of soybean oil and diglycerides—the stuff dreams were made of in the 1980s.

To make them look fancier and stretch further, the *crème horns* were sliced into disks, each disk set flat on a platter and topped with one half of a shiny crimson maraschino cherry. Using an entire cherry was out of the question. Those tiny glass jars of chemically reddened fruit weren't exactly cheap, my mother often reminded me. In New England, frugality is its own religion. Making food stretch is practically sacrament.

The sight of those little disks, all glossy and white against the porcelain platter, made my mouth water. I scanned the basement to make certain no one was around, then grabbed two *crème circles* and shoved them both into my mouth. The burst of flavor was pure ambrosia, soft and sweet, a frenzy of simple carbohydrates. At home, my brother and I got treats with some regularity, usually in the form of powdered doughnuts or Little Debbie snack cakes, but nothing so special as *crème horns*. *Crème horns* were pretty. *Crème horns* were delicate. And because they were explicitly for fellowship, *crème horns* were forbidden fruit.

I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I didn't care—not that much, anyway. With one eye on the door, I grabbed two more disks, chewing with haste and rearranging what remained on the platter so no one would notice anything missing. Whatever remorse I felt was eclipsed by the carnal pleasure of indulgence. A luscious film of shortening coated my teeth. Granules of sugar danced on my tongue. I was giddy and lightheaded by the physical manifestation of my sneakiness and rapid calorie consumption.

But I also felt relieved—relieved to put some distance between Rev. Rothrock and myself. While he was a kind and funny man, I found his sermons dull and confusing. The scriptures he quoted seemed vague and contradictory, sometimes even nonsensical. How could Noah build an ark large enough for all the animals in the world? How could a man be swallowed by a whale and live to tell about it? During the sermon, we couldn't ask questions, and I had a lot of questions.

Most of the stories in the Bible seemed to indicate one thing: we should all be good because being good pleased God. That was hard to do

sometimes. At school, I listened to my teacher, Miss Grace, who was young and attractive but merciless with rules and punishments. She revoked my recess privileges almost daily for talking out of turn. Did that make me bad? Did God see me there at my desk, second row from the left, with my head down while the other children played hopscotch and kickball? Did it make him angry? I felt envy too, for the girls in class with nicer clothes and prettier hair, with mothers waiting at home to make them snacks after school. My own mother was at work, along with my dad, not at the paper mill but at the shoe factory. In small towns like ours, there was a hierarchy for factory work, and each of us knew our place. Making paper was better than making shoes—more dignified, somehow, and certainly more profitable. Mill workers made twice as much as shoe shop workers. They lived in houses with front porches, sometimes even garages. For years to come, I would equate houses with porches to wealth and security. My family lived in a trailer on a street behind the elementary school. At night, if we left our bedroom windows open, we could hear the whistles of the trains moving through town, bringing paper to the southern part of the state.

After the mill and shoe workers came those who worked at the sawmill on the edge of town, where the scent of cedar chips replaced bleaching agents. Below them were the people who didn't have jobs at all, who collected welfare or unemployment checks. The pecking order was clear, in the clothes we wore, the cars parked in our driveways, even in the foods we toted to school in our lunch sacks—if we toted lunch sacks at all.

I was no saint, to be sure, but I wasn't as bad as some of the kids at church. One boy was sent to the pastor's office for scribbling "fuck" in the hymnal. Another got caught smoking cigarettes in the bell tower. I thought smoking was gross, and I restricted my use of curse words to the playground and the occasional Girl Scout troop meeting. The older girls in my troop sat in a circle and gossiped about sex and pubic hair. I sat outside the circle and mostly listened, hoping God wouldn't find me guilty by association.

At home, I obeyed my parents but fought with my brother, usually over toys and chores. Then, to keep myself out of trouble, I told lies—just little ones but lies nonetheless. And sometimes at night, after all the trains had gone by, I'd dare God to do something to prove His existence. Make a dog bark. Flicker the lights. Send me a sign. But no sign came, and I wondered, did that mean He didn't exist, or was He paying attention to someone more deserving? My mother had to split her time between two children. Maybe God had to split His time too.

After school, while my parents were still at work, I snooped on them as well, browsing through my mother's jewelry box, her closet and her dresser drawers. My mother wore jeans and t-shirts most days, but her necklaces and bracelets, her summer dresses and suede handbags all suggested a life beyond being our mother, beyond working and making dinner and folding

laundry. A velvet choker with sparkling gemstones. Strappy sandals with cork heels. These things in her closet rarely saw the light of day, and I wondered why she kept them. Were they memories or dreams? Poring over her hidden treasures, I glimpsed a world wider than my narrow scope, a world of terrific secrets and surprises, where people reconciled the truth of who they were with the notion of who they'd rather be.

From my mother's closet, I went to the kitchen to explore the cabinets, finding comfort in the more practical provisions my parents had squirreled away—boxes of thin spaghetti and elbow macaroni, jars of olives and tomato sauce, and five-pound bags of flour and rice. One Christmas, during a particularly rough year at the shoe factory, a man from church delivered a holiday food basket to my family. Inside was a frozen turkey, canned vegetables and gravy, and a pack of Stove Top stuffing, my favorite. My mother accepted the donation with a mix of relief and embarrassment. For years, she repaid the favor by dropping folded dollar bills into the weekly donation plate any time she could spare them.

I needed something to wash down the sugary aftermath of crème horns but decided against the tap water, which, I already knew, tasted like rocks. The church building was old, with old plumbing. The refrigerator yielded two options: a carton of half-and-half for the fellowship coffee and an opened bottle of Welch's grape juice. For communion, Methodists use grape juice instead of wine to avoid any consumption of alcohol—ironic, since my father, who did not accompany us to church, spent his Sundays drinking Bud Lights and watching fishing shows. Once, when he wasn't looking, I snuck a sip from his amber bottle. The taste was bitter and yeasty, instantly revolting. Welch's was the best grape juice money could buy—tart and syrupy, not watery like that no-name stuff from our discount grocery store. I poured myself a Dixie cup's worth and drank it slowly, savoring its acidity, its balance of sour and sweet.

I dropped my cup into the garbage can and, just for the heck of it, opened each of the kitchen cabinets. There were plates and saucers, mugs for coffee, salt and pepper shakers, and dozens of tiny packets of oyster crackers, likely left over from our last potluck supper. For a moment, I considered taking a few of the packets for later, maybe even giving one to my brother. He and I loved those powdery, pillow-like crackers, loved sucking on them until they dissolved on our tongues. Then I remembered: God was watching. And while Rev. Rothrock had never explicitly said so, it seemed to me there was also a hierarchy for sins. Snacking on fellowship treats was akin to sharing, since technically they were for everyone. But taking crackers home in my pockets was closer to stealing, and I didn't want to give God any more reasons to ignore me.

Then suddenly, like an elephant on the Serengeti, the church's organ trumpeted through the sanctuary and down to the basement, signaling the

end of Sunday service. The blast was my cue to return to my mother, who never seemed to suspect anything improper about my absences during the sermons. She simply slid over and made room for me on the pew. If I wasn't a good girl in God's eyes, at least I still was in hers.

The conclusion of service was always the same. Rev. Rothrock would raise one hand and bless the congregation. Then Mrs. Emery, the choir director, would lead everyone through the last hymn. I knew most of the songs by heart. Methodism, after all, involved lots of memorization. One year at Lent, I made it my mission to master the Apostles' Creed. While the Catholics gave up meat and other things for the holy period before Easter, we Methodists did good deeds to express our dedication to God. I practiced every day, reciting the creed over and over in my bedroom, on the walk to school, and at recess while my head was down. If I could get the wording right, then maybe I could redeem myself. I could still be good. But in the end, my efforts were fruitless. The text had too many clauses and too many names. Who was Pontius Pilate, anyway? I preferred the Lord's Prayer, which was simpler and more poetic. The words lingered, like a promise. As I ascended the stairs to the sanctuary, pipe organ blasting, I mouthed the familiar words, *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*, with the taste of crème horns and grape juice still clinging to my lips.

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# CRAB ORCHARD REVIEW

From this point forward, we will be open to receiving submissions for the next three 2020 online issues of *Crab Orchard Review*. Everything should be sent to us through Submittable (no postal or email submissions), \$2.00 per submission. All submitted work will be eligible for \$500.00 prizes in each issue for one piece of poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction selected by our editors. Here is our publication plan:

Issue 1. Student Writing Issue publication goal: March 2020  
Submissions open August 1, 2019 through September 30, 2019

Issue 2. General issue with COR 2020 Annual Literary Prizes  
publication goal: June 2020  
Submissions open December 1, 2019 through January 31, 2020

Issue 3. Pads, Paws, & Claws ~ Writers on Animals  
publication goal: October 2020  
Submissions open March 1, 2020 through April 31, 2020

<https://craborchardreview.submittable.com/submit>