

Finding God In Appalachia

Ace Anthony

The old church we used to go to, which had been completely abandoned a year ago, sat utterly still amongst the overgrowth of trees and bushes; its white panels were stark against the gray sky that promised an afternoon storm. I admired Thomas' hands, which were covered in glow in the dark paint from the two coats he brushed on his little sister's stars that stuck to her ceiling. Early summer Tennessee fog drifted at our ankles. This felt like the end of something. I watched as Thomas opened the doors of the church whose wood was eaten away by weather and rot. The new church, now two miles up the road, would've been too risky.

The nave was small and motionless, daring for us to invade its holy ground in anxiety. Our footsteps echoed as Thomas lightly pulled at my wrist to follow him inside. We sat in the pews a respectable distance away from the altar, sweating in the humidity.

Scenes of childhood ghosts played out in front of me. I remembered Thomas as an altar boy lighting candles, his waxy fingertips and the soft incandescent glow across his baby-fat face. His mother's chipped rosary made of dark wooden beads she held to her forehead when she prayed. The thick Appalachian accent of our fathers as they chatted under May's rain-irritated clouds in the parking lot where the asphalt was now overtaken by weeds.

The silence was cut with a click of Thomas' tongue. "What'd you wanna talk about?" he asked,

the lilt in his words worse due to nerves—tonguing with harsh, southern articulation because that's how his mother spoke.

I exhaled in finality. "I think I still like you," I confessed. My admission resonated throughout the church and back onto us; the impact equivalent to being struck.

In apprehension, I watched the tension in his features settle slowly. What remained was profession, as if he was declaring his faith in my name. Thomas leaned towards me easily, smiling, like he had dreamt of this.

I surrendered and kissed him.

Electric shockwaves exploded within me. Sin said in every language could not epitomize this moment.

"Anthony," Thomas uttered in prayer, like I had the saint's holy hands teaching him a new definition of amalgamation.

I delicately lowered him on the pew. He gazed up at me, and it was then that I understood the relationship between hunger and desire. For a moment, I thought I'd be sick.

I let him reach for me. Thomas' fingers slid up my ribs to push into the spaces between the bones like he was trying to mold me as God did. I shook above him. I could not help but think of the way his hands moved over my cotton shirt, leaving a crime scene of glow in the dark fingerprints I can only see in the dark. My skin glowed in neon permanence.

Hot, calloused palms stopped against either shoulder blade of mine. Thomas dug into my frame, and I knew he was searching for lost wings in my back that would prove that our acts could be holy.

I yielded to him. This moment, I determined, was more holy than any other religious experience I'd endured. How could those who would damn me to Hell consider this sin? Thomas laughed and I nearly cried. How could I survive this? Guilt made me shiver as the cicadas outside cried out in anguish, but above that was fear. I had never felt more truly terrified knowing that love—queerness—could feel this exceptional. This felt like dying. Sunlight bled into the raised arches above us, forever holding dust motes in a golden smoke; I was briefly reminded of the first time I had seen Thomas with his father's cigarettes at the age of thirteen in the empty attic above his bedroom and almost set it on fire. We learned how to baptize ourselves in smoke.

I ached to be in a perpetual state of burning in Hell for this sin. Thomas' breath hitched and his hands fervently clutched onto my arm like there was sanctity within me. In this agony I would suffer because if this was not a form of holiness, then I didn't know what was.

The priest will condemn us to Hell a thousand times over a week from now. Thomas' father will, in that drawl of his, tell his son he will not have a queer living under his roof after learning what we

did. Thomas will pray and pray and will never touch me again.

When it ended, Thomas sat beside me with his chest bare on the bench. His skin appeared pale and otherworldly. A light rain hissed on the roof. I remembered smoking with him out the attic window that faced the yard. It was then I started to admire Thomas in a way that was foreign yet alluring to me, a sort of intensity that always swelled in my chest. I tried not to cough when I exhaled, wanting to impress him. Our hands hesitated over each other on the cigarette as we passed it back and forth before we learned what it meant to be gay. Before we understood the consequences of being in this forbidden body.

I reached for Thomas' sunburnt hand. I was shaking violently. He looked at me, but he was crying. He knew what would happen next. I stared into those dark eyes, the ones that could eat me alive, as Thomas pulled away from me completely and left the church with silent footsteps. I waited until the nausea passed. I prayed to the lone watching eyes of the crucifix, and He knew the weight and depth of my guilt. I choked down any inkling of ardor or my love. A flash of lightning cast long shadows through the stained-glass windows, transforming the pews into the shape of monsters. Forgive me, Father, for I have dreamed of something beautiful.