

## Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

# Michaelmas Fragments

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### **Content Note:**

This creative contribution refers to suicidal thoughts and mental-health crisis. Readers may wish to exercise care, and those affected by similar experiences are encouraged to seek appropriate support.

### **Abstract**

Faith need not rest on literal or factual truth alone; there are emotional and psychological truths that speak more powerfully through poetic and creative form. “Michaelmas Fragments” weaves found poetry and narrative prose drawn from personal journals to explore the complex realities of being both a survivor of suicidal crisis and an Anglican priest, ordained on the Feast of St Michael and All Angels. Through evocative juxtapositions – sacrament and hunger, vocation and despair, hope and fruitfulness – the piece invites readers to encounter the tensions at the heart of faith and survival.



**Fragment 1**

It is just bread, not even bread,  
somehow less than bread.

A thin disk of nothingness,  
a moment on the palate,  
or stuck to it,  
before a sip of wine.

It is Christ – I know that.  
He is here, he is present,  
but body and mind  
have emptied of all meaning.

A vacuum,  
a eucharistic black hole.

The president is going through the motions:  
‘Take, bless, break’,  
as he might read a set of IKEA furniture  
assembly instructions,  
or announce train departure times.

‘Take, eat, this is my body, given for you.’

No, not given for me, it seems.

In an act of body memory,  
I extend my hands to receive.  
The paten passes me by.

Perhaps it is a mistake,  
an oversight.

‘Drink this, all of you.’

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And now the cup too.  
Oh.

Yet I administer, and smile,  
and touch the hands of those  
for whom the host in mine  
might be their only physical contact  
for that week –

a hug, an embrace,  
a pledge of love,  
in a little wafer,  
in a paltry sip of wine.

Perhaps the crumbs are for me?  
The dregs?

No, no; I am not worthy  
so much as to gather up the crumbs  
under this table.

This was the intention.

I am hungry, starving, bereft.

Well, it is just bread.

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## **Michaelmas 1**

Brambles choke the bushes beside the west door, their fruit gleaming where the birds have somehow missed it – scattered black jewels in a tangle of green and brown. Mum tells me there's a tradition: this is the last day to pick blackberries. It's the fruit that, in many ways, shaped my childhood – the foraging for the juiciest berries before the local councils

had their wicked way and cut back the hedges, driving some brambles further back in the name of safety, though carefully sparing a few for the birds.

Legend has it that Lucifer fell on Michaelmas Day – late September seems apt for falling – and that the Archangel himself expelled him. When he landed on earth, he crashed into brambles, cursed the bush and spat on it, making its fruit unfit to eat.

‘You will know them by their fruits’, says the Matthean Jesus. Strong stuff; you wouldn’t want to meet this figure round a dark corner in the lonely Judaeen desert. Yet the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus is of a gentler revivalist than we might expect, I reason.

‘Yet remember in your heart that if it should come about that the Church, or any of its members, is hurt or hindered by reason of your neglect, your fault will be great and God’s judgment will follow’, the archbishop warns as I make my declarations. The blackberries never harmed anyone, except for the odd dippy tummy in children who picked them before they were ripe.

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## Fragment 2

‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.’

I stare at the ceiling,  
body and mind conspiring  
to make little possible  
other than eating and sleeping  
during the day.

But at night,  
at the very moment  
when sleep should come –

‘Please, God, let sleep come,  
or let it be morning.  
Lighten our darkness, O Lord.’ –

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it slips away,  
no, it runs, breathless, teasing.

And in its wake,  
it leaves so much,  
all of it exhausting,  
but no, not exhausting enough  
to sleep.

The phone goes.

I am on duty,  
covering for a chaplain on leave,  
and it is the nurse from ICU.

Someone is dying,  
and wants to be commended to God –

‘Please, God, let sleep come,  
or let it be morning.  
Lighten my darkness, O Lord.’ –

I pull myself out of bed,  
every limb heavy, heavy, heavy,  
and tired,  
so tired,  
but not enough to sleep.

I put on a clerical shirt  
that passes the sniff test  
from the pile of clothes  
on the floor.  
I don’t have enough energy  
to push the car handle  
so that the door opens,  
but somehow, now,  
I am at a hospital bedside:

‘Lighten our darkness, O Lord.  
May your rest this day be in peace,  
and your dwelling place  
in the heavenly Jerusalem ...’

I trace the sign of the cross,  
gently, gently.

You sleep the sleep of death.

‘Please, God, let sleep come,  
or let it be morning.’

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## **Michaelmas 2**

The kneeler is hardwood, perhaps maple, but stained to resemble walnut – it’s amusing what details catch our attention. I keep slipping off the foam pad; the vinyl covering is slick against the poly-cotton of my alb, and the kneeler polished to an inch of its life. Probably done to impress the archbishop, though he appears indifferent to such niceties. He isn’t one for fuss-pottery. Still, the earthy vanilla, almost-nutty aroma of furniture polish and the resulting gleam are pleasant and oddly comforting.

I grimace slightly as I try to find purchase with my right foot, relieved that the alb is just long enough to cover my awkward movements. The shelf meant for storing Bibles is ironically in my way, making it just a bit harder to steady myself as the archbishop offers me a Bible – pristine, carefully inscribed. I grasp it with my right hand, white-knuckled, both of us holding onto it with my head slightly bowed and still grimacing. Always grimacing. The archbishop boldly declares, ‘Receive this Book, as a sign of the authority which God has given you this day to preach the Word and to minister his holy Sacraments.’

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**Fragment 3**

It's 2 a.m.

The smell of burnt toast.

Cold mugs of tea  
sit on the breakfast bar,  
gathering skins unbroken by biscuits  
or slow, slow sips.

They give us something to do with our hands,  
something to look at.

Mum is here too.

I stare at my mug.  
We both do.

Not because the tea scum holds any answers,  
but probably because we don't want to look anywhere else.

We avoid looking elsewhere,  
most likely because,  
if we do,  
we might start to cry.

We don't want to do that,  
probably because if we start to cry,  
we might not be able to stop.

Mum has just heard me say the words:  
'I'm thinking of taking my own life.'

She doesn't know what to do or say,  
but she is here,  
with our mugs of tea,  
with our charcoal toast

(this is more than bread),

and for now,  
that is enough.

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### **Michaelmas 3**

We stand now by the west door, near the baptismal font – sadly under-used, with a wheeled wooden basin (not unlike the old TVs teachers would roll out in the summer months to show documentaries) pressed into service instead. It’s a pity; the font here, marking entry into the church, is still generous compared with many later ‘bird-bath’ style fonts. I resolve, quietly, to make use of it if at all possible.

For the occasion, the font is dressed with flowers. It isn’t the season for narcissi, though they’ll be the go-to at Easter – ironic, given their mythic origin. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He eventually pined away and died beside the water, and where he died sprang the flower that bears his name. I wonder how many have mistaken the baptismal font for Narcissus’s pool: Lord, have mercy.