

Stories of Redemption by Emily P. Freeman,

Sarah Bessey, Trillia Newbell and more

soul bare

edited by

CARA SEXTON

“So often Christian books offer us a well-intended formula for healing—one we’ve heard so often, we’ve got it down pat. But what happens when the formula fails in real life? What happens when the right ingredients or the proper measures still leave us empty in despair instead of full with promise and hope? *Soul Bare* won’t offer you a formula. You won’t turn the final pages armed with a ready-made antidote for brokenness or a cure-all salve for sin. What you *will* find is raw realness: uncensored stories by real people wrestling with the grit of real life. Lean in deep to *Soul Bare*. Your wounds have a place here. Your heart will find a home between these pages. You will see your real self in these stories. And you will glimpse our real God.”

Michelle DeRusha, author of *Spiritual Misfit*

“I held my breath, I cried, I shuddered, I whispered prayers, I ached. Most of all, I fell more deeply in love with Jesus through these words and stories. I can’t help but think how wide and deep and long this love is that finds us all so broken and yet so beautiful.”

Idelette McVicker, founder and editor-in-chief, *SheLoves Magazine*

“If you harbor any doubts that God is present in the broken places, let this prayerful chorus of voices dispel them. *Soul Bare* is a psalm to what is hard and holy, a glorious song of praise to a God who reaches into darkness and blesses even our deepest wounds.”

Esther Emery, writer

“What does it mean to be ‘authentic’? We give the word a lot of reverence, but actually stepping out in authenticity remains a frightening prospect for many of us. There are those parts of our lives that we would rather not acknowledge, that we would rather forget, that we assume would isolate us if they were found out. *Soul Bare* is proof that authenticity never isolates, but always invites new growth and community. Any reader is bound to find him- or herself in these pages somewhere.”

Matt Appling, author of *Life After Art* and *Plus or Minus*

“Wading through the waters of *Soul Bare*, I felt I’d been entrusted with something precious. These pages are filled with the all-too-true and all-too-resonant stories of real people who have loved, lost, sinned, survived, hoped and healed. The fact that these contributors happen to be gifted writers only makes the reading that much better. They are in essence ‘going first,’ bringing their scars into broad daylight so the rest of us will follow—and Lord knows we need to. It’s way too easy to hide behind small talk and Christian cliché. You can get away with it for quite a long time, but real life begins in real relationship. And relationships are born of vulnerability. We’ve got to learn to drop our masks and be human together. I’m grateful beyond words to the brave women and men who shared their humanity and God’s goodness on the pages of this book. It’s an absolute gift.”

Christa Wells, award-winning singer-songwriter

“These stories are brave, honest and lyrical: a mosaic of shadows and light. As I turned these pages, I felt like I was being invited to glimpse a sacred cross section of the human experience. Suffering. Celebration. Despair. Hope. Sin. Forgiveness. And through it all an unmistakable thread of relentless redemption.”

Micah J. Murray, writer

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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
ivpress.com
email@ivpress.com

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InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, visit intervarsity.org.

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Published in association with MacGregor Literary, Inc.

Cover design: Cindy Kiple
Interior design: Beth McGill
Images: © Rosie Ann Prosser / Trevillion Images

ISBN 978-0-8308-4326-8 (print)
ISBN 978-0-8308-9439-0 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America ☺



As a member of the Green Press Initiative, InterVarsity Press is committed to protecting the environment and to the responsible use of natural resources. To learn more, visit greenpressinitiative.org.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Freeman, Emily P., 1977- author. | Sexton, Cara, editor.

Title: *Soul bare : stories of redemption* / by Emily P. Freeman, Sarah Bessey, Trillia Newbell and more ; edited by Cara Sexton.

Description: Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016010697 (print) | LCCN 2016011635 (ebook) | ISBN 9780830843268 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780830894390 (eBook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life—Meditations.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .F73934 2016 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016010697>

P 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Y 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16

For you, dear reader,
and all the soul-bare stories
that whisper the truth
of a wild and beautiful you

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INTRODUCTION

DEAR READER-FRIEND,

There's a lot of talk about authenticity out there. A lot of feverish cheerleading about being real, showing our messy selves and holding one another up while doing it. But I've withdrawn into listening for a while, sort of taking things in while I withdrew somewhat from the cacophonous conversations about authenticity, even as I fought my own obstacles to bring a book about it into the light of day. It's been a time when my own shadows hovered darker, my darkest clouds loomed closer than ever, and I had to squint to see Truth within and between all the well-meaning voices of Christendom, even in all its beauty. What I have seen is that there is a lie so many of us believe: *Your wounds have no place here.*

Yet there are times when the Christian community is all that stands between me and hopelessness—days when friends and soul companions reach across the distance and transform it into a tabernacle where we gather and laugh, or mourn, or shake our fists together. I know what beauty looks like when I see it. This is beauty. It always has been. It always will be.

There are different kinds of truth telling. There's a height above laundry piles and laughter. There's a depth below bad-hair

days and fast-food confessions. When I said yes to coordinating a book about authenticity, about the raw and real baring of our souls for a holy, redemptive purpose, I did so without anything in particular to say but with an open heart to see what he had to show me. I did so because this project was his from the beginning. It has always been his. And now, three years after God stirred my own scarred and broken heart with the whisper of his love for the scarred and broken depths of yours, I know one thing I didn't know when I started. It is something I think you'll come to know, too, as you recognize familiar faces and familiar shadows that challenge even the most radiant countenance among us.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:37-39 ESV)

You've heard the verses before. You may have even sung the songs. But do you *know* this, really, to be true? Do you know that your wounds, too, are welcome? Do you know that the soul-bare places, the sights and sounds of your life that you shelter from public display, belong to him? That he resides there? That he *redeems* there? My prayer for you, reader, is that you do. That you always will. And that these pages will remind you.

The stories that follow were each written by a different author, all of them telling their own redemptive soul-bare truth. These have been broken up into three sections to help you navigate through the book: Part One: Letting Go, Part Two: Leaning In,

and Part Three: Hope and Healing. At the end of the book is a bio section that tells a little about the authors and where else you can find their work. Each of these writers is blessing the world with their words, and I encourage you to visit their blogs, buy their books, and otherwise support the important work they are doing by honoring their writing gifts, and then to keep the conversation open by telling your own soul-bare stories.

To tell our truth is to link arms across the divides that keep us out, to close the gaping lie that says our wounds do not matter. Together we are a living mosaic—a tiled path winding through the beauty and pain of human experience and leading toward redemption, and this book, together with your own soul-bare story, is a work of art that speaks of forgiveness, grace and healing. We tell the stories of life and love, bound together in the perfection and completion of Christ's great sacrifice. The very Word of God is, after all, a collection of broken stories about broken people just like us. Your story is your own and has been written by the Creator with purpose. Even if your edges are chipped, your story is beautiful. Tell it.

In his love and light, standing soul bare beside you,

Cara

Part One

LETTING GO





MORE FOR YOU THAN THIS

Shannan Martin

2008

Spring descends in its usual way, slow and seductive, singing me awake from months of face-smacking cold and lake-effect snow, promising that while all good things come to an end, so do the bad.

Our six acres of pasture are as green to me as motherhood, each splintered fence post, every sweep of a sudsy cloth over chubby arms waking me up to who I was made to be. After years of waiting, I am a mommy to Calvin and Ruby. After years of working and saving, I'm a wanna-be woman of the uncertain frontier, rising up to work the land we'd fought so long to own.

Truth rings a bell—I am ill-equipped to manage both perennial beds and potty-training. But this is the life I always wanted, so I reach out and touch its reverb, quieting my doubts, absorbing their song until naptime, when I tuck my one-year-old and three-year-old into their beds and make a beeline for some quiet. *Hush, little ones, we're safe here. You can rest now. We're home.*

Pulling rain boots onto my feet, I catch my breath along the west row of pines, where redemption takes shape in the melting

snow and the only thing demanding my attention is the slim neck of a hyacinth, the lifted lips of a newborn crocus. Every step is discovery, uncovering more of the treasure I've been given: the love, the children, the drafty farmhouse, the crumbling barns, the land, *the life*.

I'm uncovering gratitude in the slope of a roofline, finding my roots among the oaks. My eyes know only hope. My heart keeps company with the security of our simple life.

2010

Two years later to the month, almost everything is changing. We both heard the whisper. We both turned around, walked away, refused to believe the words were true, or for us. *I have more for you than this*.

More? Impossible.

The whisper chips away our control with its persistence, doubling efforts to jarring effect as we fly across the world then back home, a broken-hearted toddler with pain in his almond eyes raging in our arms.

It's just the beginning but, thank God, we have no clue. Had the shock waves not been meted out, they surely would have broken us.

Day bleeds into night and back again, the edges of every sure thing warping around us until our world no longer stands erect. Morning comes each day with a vengeance, and we stir sorrow into the tea that scalds our throats the whole way down.

Our precious baby stares back at us—strangers—and we try not to long for easier days. The hours are clocked as over and over he brings us his tiny, Korean soccer shoes or his corduroy coat. These are his closest companions, the remnants of what

he lost in order for our prayers to be answered. His eyes wear mourning shrouds, pulsing grief beyond their years. *Let me go home.*

We are home, but Silas is not, and the ground tremors beneath the weight of this truth.

Life is no longer simple. Security is irrelevant, so far away that we wonder if we'd ever known it all, or if we would recognize it if it returned.

One month passes, and our reward is the sudden loss of my job.

Four more weeks, and our words to our two oldest children are spent in promises we do not dare allow ourselves to believe. *Things will soon be normal again.* We want to rock Silas in the turquoise chair, to sing into his ear, to sniff the top of his head. We want him to hold our hand, but he shakes it loose. At less than two years old, he feels safer in the corner of his room than in our arms.

We are given another gift, one we don't recognize as grace: my husband's sturdy career in federal politics is over, abruptly and with finality, a decade of expert rung-climbing knocked to its knees in the wake of another man's scandal. An unseen force begins siphoning our meticulously drawn and executed financial safety net through a hidden drain at the bottom of our life. The things we held closest to our chest, the ones that made us feel smart and responsible, become slippery in our hands.

Ever slowly, painfully human, we begin to see from all sides the truth we were handed: God *does* have more for us, and often, his more looks like less.

It can look like loss and pain.

From the vantage point of God's kingdom set on the face of this wobbly earth, the very best he has to offer can look like

surrender and taste like tears. It sounds like a for-sale sign being driven into dirt and feels like walking in reverse.

Our farmhouse is on the market, the one we swore we would never leave. God wants more. He wants everything we were taught to want: our ego, our DIY security, our account balances, our dreams. Silas is teaching us in baby steps how to cozy up to pain. Now we see it everywhere. Our job is to love our neighbor, to care for the poor, to align with the low. We've chosen the world and called it our religion. We have served an unholy trinity of cash, security and *staus quo*.

Oh, to have our conscience quelled, to unsee and unknow what had never for a moment left the pages of the book we said we loved.

What good is a faith that inverts the paradigm, putting God at the center of *my* will? Why did the Sunday school Jesus never talk about losing my life for his sake? Decades of church membership and dutiful rule following had done nothing to prepare us for wherever God is leading.

I try to fend off the fear snaking our way. I fight my own heart. I'm Lot's wife, already turning around, and I'm not even gone.

A soundtrack assembles of naysayers, doubters and punks. Most of them mean well, but our hearts split and scab, then split again. They say we've lost our minds, and my pride quietly leans their way. But just past the double-paned kitchen window of the home we've been asked to leave, my baby loses himself for a moment in a game of chase with his new brother and sister. His courage yanks a thread deep inside me, and my fingers unfurl. Maybe I don't want to be the one deciding my future. Maybe that's all I need to know for now.

Locking eyes with my youngest son through the glass, it's clear—we all need help remembering how to trust.

2012

We clear the table in a hurry, dinner plates rinsed, leftovers snapped under lids, the clatter of three young kids ricocheting off close quarters. Summer's long days are losing their steam, the leaves of the maples hinting at gold. And the air? Well, it's perfect. The buzz from the park positioned just across the street floats through the screens, a unique torture when you're eight or six or four.

It's only been two months, but this is already home. Our old, farmhouse art hangs on the walls as proof, and a new path is being worn between our house and the one next door. Ruby picks up Spanish phrases in her kindergarten class at the school just two blocks down. Neighbors knock on our door well past bedtime.

These are the weeks of discovering which parts of us work and what needs to go. We're all a bit at sea, but we're here together, and we're still *us*.

I'm still prone to waxing poetic about the sleepy turning of a rose. I like to talk peanut butter cake as much as I used to. But I couldn't have guessed how I was made for life on the wrong side of the tracks. Give me street art, cussing teenagers, neighbors with laundry carts and nicotined fingertips. Show me what's real. I can take it. I *prefer* it. My blissful farm-girl life pointed me toward simple gratitude so that now, right here, I recognize its reflection on the blister and burn of days spent banging against the pain of another.

Looking hard in the mirror, I hunt down my humanity and put it on trial. I confront my ugliness, the drip and drear of a misspent life. I think long on what really matters when it comes to this one life on earth.

The chaff is being shucked. We don't want it. We shove away our old pretenses, our ego, our better judgment, and trade them

for risk, the threat of judgment and the certainty that we'll never explain it well enough. Laying down my peace-keeping armor, I find who I was always meant to be, a woman who knows no bravery apart from God, a girl desperate to be saved. Let the opinions and disappointments fall around my ankles like spent petals. For the first time, I don't care.

We are simply here to be neighbors, to choose a place not accustomed to being chosen. We're still introverted and awkward, with normal jobs and kids who gripe. We don't have time to anticipate all the mistakes we'll make, and we sure won't offer predictions about the future. This woman with her color-coded plans and ten-year goals is tired of getting it wrong, and besides, the park is booming and we're racing daylight.

A train screams down the tracks like one thousand breaking hearts, but across the street, kids squeal, their legs pumping them higher into the sky. Little girls dangle from monkey bars, rowdy boys take up fallen walnuts as free-range ammo.

So long, quiet, long-lane evenings.

Calvin and Ruby race to meet friends you'd think they've known forever. Silas hangs back, full of four-year-old questions and the occasional protest.

The three of us lag behind: Daddy, Silas and Mommy, a silhouette of grace against the low-setting sun.

Somewhere in the thrum of neighborhood living, I catch a familiar tune. *I still have more for you.*

The truth sets a fire in my bones. More often it looks different than we imagined, but I'm not afraid anymore.

"Swing me into the air!" Silas shouts. And we do.

He never lets go of our hands.



DARK CLOUDS AND ABUNDANT GRACE

Trillia J. Newbell

DARK, THUNDEROUS CLOUDS fill the sky. Even the slightest glimpse of sunshine is quenched by the cumulonimbus.

You take a step of faith and walk outside. Big balls of frozen ice begin to fall, hitting you one by one. It hurts. It doesn't make sense.

Keep walking . . .

The dark clouds seem to close in around you. Each step is harder and more treacherous.

Keep walking . . .

The further you walk, the harder it gets. "This plodding is so rot with pain," you mumble as you look ahead.

There in the distance is a ray of sunlight. You remember that beautiful inheritance. You know it's coming.

Keep walking . . .

It's an act of valiant faith to put one foot in front of the other,

Keep walking . . .

You're going to make it to the end. Weak. Tired. But hopeful, because of that little ray, that faint but sure ray.

Keep walking.

And when you get there you'll realize, he has always been there.



That scene above is a familiar theme of my short life. Trial after trial, the Lord reminds me of his faithfulness, of his steadfast love. Joy comes in the morning, but the morning doesn't always come within eight hours of the sun setting. Dark clouds have filled my days, and I've often wondered if they'd overwhelm me.

The clouds crowded me when my best friend, my father, passed from this earth and into another. I would never see his bright eyes and handsome grin again. I wouldn't get the joy of racing him across the parking lot. The drumbeats that would fill the living room from nothing more than his thighs and knees is now a faint memory. How he could make such sounds from his quads I'll never really know.

The clouds crowded me when an older man that a group of my friends trusted invaded my space and my innocence. It was a strange way to wake up—a stranger's hands in places meant only for my future husband. But the most excruciating pain was watching his wife on the stand in the courtroom explain that he was doing better—he had stopped molesting his two children. The clouds were dark over my head that day.

The clouds crowded me six sweet weeks after my husband and I welcomed the news of our first child with joy that we were sure the heavens could feel. We walked in the doctor's office eager to hear the subtle sound of a heart that had been

ignited by our God. We had heard that the beats of those tiny hearts were fast—like little flutters. But we didn't hear a heartbeat, and we had to experience the agony of that loss three additional times.

Oh, dark clouds have most definitely covered my head. But like the psalmist in Psalm 121 I cry out:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper;

the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day,

nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;

he will keep your life.

The LORD will keep

your going out and your coming in

from this time forth and forevermore. (ESV)

God knew about my dark clouds. He knew that I would mourn and weep. God reminds me in his Word that he is my Father. Where does my help come from? It comes from my Father. Each cloudy day brought a ray of hope. Joy comes in the morning. Does God change our circumstances? Sometimes. But more than not, he changes our perspective. He changes our hearts. When I felt empty, he filled me with more of himself.

God doesn't promise to take away difficult circumstances, but he does promise to be your keeper. Joy is not an artificial happiness. Joy comes from a deep trust in our holy, good, sovereign God. Joy is rest. Resting in him, our Father, our keeper. He is our sustainer of life. We can jump and play because we know that the mighty and holy one is on our side. He draws near to us. He tells you to come, oh weary soul, and he will give you rest (Mt 11:28). The rest will bring peace and joy—joy that we'll experience forevermore.

Forevermore. That is our hope. Not that our joy will come here and now but that he will one day wipe away every tear and mourning will be no more. Hope is that one day we'll see our Savior face to face. He is making all things new. And on that day, we will experience a joy that will be indescribable. Those dark clouds will be no more. He longs for us to lift up our eyes and remember where our help comes from. Remember our inheritance and the promises he's provided for us in his Word. Those are for you and me—today. Right now. Yes, even you right now can experience joy—sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.

Hymn writer William Cowper once wrote that the dark clouds would break with blessings on your head. He was right. The clouds that we so dread have a purpose. The blessing could simply, yet profoundly, be experiencing more of Jesus. We may not receive all the answers this side of eternity, but may it be that we can say, blessed be the name of the Lord!

If you find yourself in the deepest of darkest clouds searching for joy, ask the Lord who gives abundantly to those who ask. He has grace stored up for you, for this occasion. His grace will sustain you and will bring you out of the despair. His grace is what allows us to say, yes, I am joyful. Not because of anything in me or in my strength but because I have a God who is keeping me, strengthening me and reminding me of my great hope. Joy does come in the morning.



COLD, DARK GROUND

Jennifer J. Camp

*For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the
mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.*

ROMANS 8:6 NASB

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD and my back aches from gray rock pressing underneath the thin blanket from the trunk of his car. The creek bed sits dry, and I am above it, lying pressed flat next to a partially paved dirt road. The road my family drove on to picnic in these same, sloped hills at Easter. The road my grandfather swerved off of wildly, with grandkids next to him, for fun, in his white Dodge pickup with the bouncy seats. It is just me now, denim skirt too short, tank top stretched against barely tan skin, and the boyfriend I convinced myself last year I would marry. How else to explain a good girl, the granddaughter of the town doctor with the good grades and Sunday school reputation, making out with the too-tall basketball player in the silver Camaro?

I shouldn't be here. Not like this.

I don't remember any inner struggle about whether or not to go through with this. It seemed inevitable, this choice hardly a choice at all. My dad's voice at the dinner table years ago, the only "sex ed" talk I can ever remember having with my family, running like a tape through my head: "Good girls don't kiss boys until they get married."

But I was never the girl they thought I was, and nothing makes it clearer than the confusion of this fifteen-year-old girl hiding in the foothills on rock-strewn dirt, watching wild California oaks frame a starless black sky.

As a teenager I didn't believe I had what it took to be popular and have a group of close friends. I believed I wasn't interesting enough, smart enough, witty enough or funny enough. From the lie that I didn't have a voice—manifesting from years of being told I was quiet by well-meaning adults outside my family—to my refusal to believe I was capable of writing my own eighth-grade valedictorian graduation speech haunted me. I didn't believe I had words, so I borrowed another's. I didn't believe I was good enough to be liked and accepted just as I was. How could I possibly be loved?

Being physically intimate with boys became a way for me to find and gain attention I felt I didn't deserve. Having a boyfriend meant I was desired and worthy of being pursued. Offering physical intimacy, I believed, would make a boy stick around. I was shy in group gatherings, but offering myself sexually to a boy made me feel empowered. Sex became a way that I could control people—these boys and these relationships. I liked that sex made me feel worthy and strong.

Months after losing my virginity in the dry California foothills, I became pregnant. I read the thin blue line on the white

plastic stick in disbelief and horror a few days before school let out for Christmas vacation. The next night, panicked and terrified, I ran down my driveway in my thin blue and gold polyester basketball uniform, still on from a late night game. I sought solace in the orchard that was my childhood playground, the wonderland of beauty my dad planted and that framed our country home.

Immune to the cold and the frost on the ground, I flung myself under one of the leafless branches blending in the black December sky. I screamed for freedom, hope, another chance—longing for life.

Low self-worth and the idol of self can breed inauthenticity, silence and shame. When pride becomes an idol, the soul cannot bear the weight of truth until the old self is laid on the block and killed.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, we see beauty of redemption when angels invite visitors to heaven who would otherwise stay in hell, apart from God. They are invited one by one to let Jesus set them free of their false selves and live, finally, in heaven with Jesus. Angels reveal the horror of the people's sins, and the desolation that remains when they continue to pick up lies and reject truth.

In one situation, a man's struggle with lust is manifested as a lizard clinging to his shoulder, whispering lies into his ear. The lizard's voice is familiar, and the man seems incapable of separating lies from truth. The whispers of deception feel a part of him and he can't imagine letting the angel rid him of the lizard, creepy as it is. The man panics at the angel's insistent request: "May I kill it?" But the man is afraid, believing the lizard's lies that he will die too if the lizard is taken away.

There is such horrific danger in clinging to our false selves. Unless we surrender and abandon these lies, these idols, these false selves to Jesus, we are the man with the decaying lizard on his shoulder, thinking the way without Jesus is best, that it is better for sin to remain. Silence about our sin births only further darkness. We lie writhing and desolate on cold, hard ground.

While my parents thought I was Christmas shopping with my boyfriend, I visited a clinic and had an abortion. I was grateful I did not need my parents' approval so no one would ever have to know. Shame, fear, pride and rebellion all outweighed preservation of life. Silence does not preserve life; it only kills.

Two decades after keeping my abortion a secret, God stirred me awake, beginning a journey in me both beautiful and painful, healing and hard. One evening, four new friends came over to pray for me, and Jesus invited me back to the dirt in the orchard. He showed me himself under the almond tree, the moment I turned away from him and decided to have an abortion. He sat with me under the almond tree while I shunned him, eyes full of tears, never turning, shining light in a dark night.

What does it mean to preserve a life? To hang on tightly to what we think is ours? To fight for what we believe in? To have all actions we take and words we say be for the purpose of self-preservation?

I imagine the answer depends on what it is we are trying to preserve—and whether or not it is worth it. And, maybe most importantly, whether what we are trying to preserve is true or false.

In C. S. Lewis's story, the man relents and the angel reaches out his flaming hands to fight for freedom from the lies that whisper and attempt to drown out the truth of God. From a

red oily reptile now broken-backed on the ground, the lizard transforms into a silver-white stallion that carries the now beautifully transformed man on his back. With the angel standing by, they ride deeper into heaven. Only when lies are abandoned and truth adopted can the man discover his true strength and know the heart of God.

Believing a lie and living it out as truth causes ripples of heartache and destruction that can never be undone. The crux is that the lie, the thing that brings about the pain, is what Jesus died for—and we must surrender the lie to him to experience the beginning of life.

Inauthenticity, hiding and pretending to be someone we are not, leads to shame. Refusing to be vulnerable for the sake of preserving pride and self-image destroys the possibility of living in Jesus' freedom and joy and hope.

Lies breed lies—nothing good, nothing salvageable, nothing that breathes. But I know where truth begins now: Jesus with me, underneath an almond tree, his arms around a desperate daughter, reaching to soften, to bring warmth and to redeem cold, dark ground.

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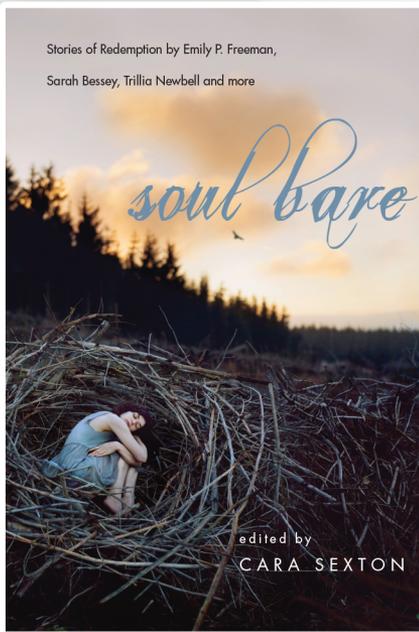
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"If you harbor any doubts that God is present in the broken places, let this prayerful chorus of voices dispel them."

—**Esther Emery**, writer