

# The Narrow Gate

## *An Editor's Note*

“Holy Land,” Ellen Pearce’s cover painting, draws viewers with its color and light. “Beautiful,” I often hear; then the viewer realizes, “Those are bombs. That’s blood down there.” If art demands transcendence, it does so through the visible, the actual, and allows us time to see beyond. Not for no reason does Pearce’s painting include a non-natural opening of light, a rectangle, like a door or window, something human-made we might call an alternate choice. The artist, there, gives us a “narrow gate” to go through—as the gospel of Matthew advises in Willis Barnstone’s *Restored New Testament*—among the wide-ranging and nearly organic images of war. I see the squared-off shape that way because I choose to, and because I can. The artist leaves the choice, finally, to me. Look at it.

Art seeks that magical brightness, which is not often easy, not often expedient. I write this on the Feast of All Saints, which would seem the height of convention, even comfort, among church goers. Not so. The saints won’t let it happen. Take “saints” here in the larger, unofficial view—as Emerson wrote, “When the half-gods go, / The gods arrive.” This morning, I heard a Jesuit priest celebrate an Austrian farmer by the name of Franz Jägerstätter, a husband with three daughters, and the only Roman Catholic in his town, in the early 1940s, to declare himself anti-Nazi. When Jägerstätter asked Church authorities to explain the contradiction between Church teaching and the Church’s own acquiescence to Hitler’s policies, they couldn’t. They said what others in their position have said over the years: They were following orders. Those orders formed the wide landscape of that time and place. In 1943, Jägerstätter refused service in Hitler’s army and chose, instead, to go through the narrow gate—into prison, in his case, where the forces of Third Reich cut off his head.

The story dramatizes something more important even than

heroism. It alerts us to the ease with which we, as a culture, can come to accept the wide landscape as normal and acceptable. I often have wondered how I would have responded to certain historical events, and I have no confidence that I would have done the right or the brave thing. I am encouraged, however, by the fortitude of others, such as our interview subject in this issue, Edward Sanders, practicing his convictions at the age of 70. I am inspired further by the Miami-based writer Mia Leonin, who asked if she could guest-edit a section of poetry about our present wars.

You will read in this issue poems, stories, and essays of people confronting different kinds of ideologies, cultural or otherwise, inflicted upon them and others. This has nothing to do with the validity of any particular religion, or of religion, itself. It concerns our ability to act out of conviction. All of the writers in this issue can be called fierce, even when facing internal dilemmas—like military vet Roy Scranton, pondering his left-over military gear: “I want to keep everything. I want to throw it all away.” Or Renée Giovarelli, an American woman working on aid projects in Kyrgyzstan, unwilling to be intimidated by a male deputy minister with a big hat. These stories, poems, and essays show people in various stages of doubt and trepidation; the stories are personal and political and cultural; and every one required conviction to write.

“To believe fully and at the same time to have doubts is not at all a contradiction,” writes philosopher Rollo May in *The Courage to Create*. “It presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment.” He understands the dual nature of art, especially literary art, in which a reader or character comes into conflict with a prevailing force, external or internal; and someone, reader or character, will be called to make a choice. What could be more exciting, or important?

Franz Jägerstätter has been beatified by the Church but not yet canonized. Here’s the good news. He already has taken his stand, which is all that matters. And more good news. Ellen Pearce does not say what she intended by that rectangle of light in her painting “Holy Land.” Maybe she expects us to step through.

—Robert Stewart