

## ORIGINAL WRITINGS

### THE WAGES OF SIN

*John Thomas Fisher, O.P.*

Eli raised his hoe.

*...whack...whack...whack...*

“Damned snake.”

*...whack...whack...whack...*

“Damned if I never’ve seen a snake in here.”

*...whack...whack...whack...*

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Miriam wasn’t about to help outside anymore. She had seen a snake a few weeks ago and wouldn’t go near the garden until it was good and dead. Eli hadn’t seen the snake, and couldn’t care less if he did, since he knew that Miriam just didn’t want to do any extra work that made her sweat too bad. Miriam told herself that she didn’t care what Eli thought anymore. She was determined solely to peel the carrots, snap the peas, clean the house, do the laundry, sew, or anything else that didn’t require her leaving the porch.

For the past twelve summers, the two had enjoyed staying at their grandparents’ house. While they were there, they would help keep the house and yard in order. They used to work together every day on their chores, but now that Miriam refused to work

in the garden, Eli seemed to have double the work. Today he was hoeing weeds in a far section of the property.

Eli was twenty-three now, which made his sister about twenty, if he remembered right. She was sitting outside in one of the rocking chairs next to her grandmother. The two sat and rocked while mending pants, threading the patches calmly and methodically like their own sort of meditation. They kept their hands busy with the pants and their mouths busy with small talk centering around the vegetables' progress, Preacher Wilson's sermon on the Sunday previous, or the other ladies in town. Miriam adored these moments with her grandmother, who looked as if she had jumped ahead a decade in time since the last year. While they were reviewing the town's most recent gossip, Eli dragged himself to the porch to grab some lemonade before returning to the weeds. Working out in the sun always made him look like he had just jumped out of a boiling lake.

"Papa's gonna hafta git some new fertilizer if he wants anything to grow over there. They got all sorts of new dirt you can spread around the yard nowadays. I'm not about to try and convinc'im, but y'all might as well."

The wrinkled skin on the side of his grandmother's face turned upward for a few seconds as she lifted the pitcher with the same worn-down hands that had reared his father. These ten acres hadn't seen anything *new* in four decades; the obvious impracticality of Eli's suggestion didn't really warrant a response.

"You're doing a fine job, honey. Just find that snake so Miriam can go out and help you finish up quicker."

Miriam watched with a sprouting tinge of guilt as her brother walked back up the hill through the yard and into the plot of land that was waiting to become a garden again. He had barely acknowledged her presence in the past week, and she

wished beyond all else that her brother had a helper out there in the sun so that he wouldn't be so angry at her. She reset her mind as she grabbed another pair of pants lying beside her and resumed threading. She smiled as she noticed within herself the safe feeling that the porch gave. The only concern of her's now was that the sun was starting to make its way toward the front of the house. The overhang was becoming less useful as the line of provided shade crawled closer to her feet. She looked at her clean toes and thanked God that her grandmother accommodated her request to work exclusively around the house.

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Now that she thought of it, Miriam never was the type of girl to head outside too much anyway. When they were younger, Eli found occasional success in convincing her to play outside in the woods. Miriam would ride her bike behind her brother along trails littered with tree stumps, pricker bushes, and fallen branches that confirmed her suspicions of a dangerous world. Once they grew up a little and he found his own friends that would catch frogs, swim in the leech-filled lake, throw mud, and whatever else it was that boys did, he quickly learned to occupy himself with anything that let him be outside and consequently away from her.

Miriam had kept to herself for the past few years, and found as much pleasure in books and in her own head as Eli did in physical activity. She could sit in her room for hours so long as she wasn't told to get up and help with something. It seemed that her past teachers, peers, or even her own family could overlook her existence. Miriam's face was as forgettable as her opinions, and her choice in clothing made the girls from *Little House on the Prairie* look like the runway models in New York. She kept two friends from town who were just as quiet as she: Ruth and Ava-Mae. Though it had taken the entirety of her childhood to learn how to trust them, they shared everything with each other. The trio had fortunately slipped through high school unnoticed by most,

and now about town they did the same. They met on Wednesday mornings at a beauty parlor frequented by women three times their age to share whatever was on their mind. Miriam kept a part time job as church custodian, a position usually reserved for the congregation's widows. She said she wouldn't mind being married soon, but she knew that if she were to continue as she was now for the rest of her life, she would be no worse off when the time came for her to slip into her deathbed.

The only truly significant moment of Miriam's life had occurred when she arrived at the beginning of the summer. While reaching to pick a hornworm off the tomato plants one morning, she spotted the yellow tip of a cottonmouth's tail. A single involuntary motion within her launched her body back and onto the ground. She landed on her backside and screamed as the snake coiled in on itself and slowly opened its mouth. It remained silent as its jaw hung open in perfect tension, its black eyes maintaining a fixed stare at her. Miriam scrambled backward until she was out of the plants and found the strength to stand up and run to the porch. She was finally able to speak by nightfall. Two months later, she could still feel the creature's stare, as if the eyes themselves had pierced her and the wound had yet to heal. The snake seemed to have observed her thoughts, and such a violation of her reserve could neither be forgotten nor forgiven overnight. If only Eli could understand her experience, he would be more sympathetic toward her resolve never to re-enter the garden where she had first become so exposed.

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Eli was everything that Miriam was not. Growing up, he tried to break her attachment to her insecurities but washed his hands when he saw his efforts producing no fruit. He instead relished his newfound independence by joining the football and wrestling teams, working in construction on the side, and paying for his first truck in cash. The fact that his hands were already so cracked

verified him for others as the worker that he knew he was. Though he didn't feel guilty about anything in his life, he knew that one day (far, far into the future) he would have to hand over his energy and health to pay back for all the beer and pleasure he consumed over the weekends. He had graduated high school by the skin of his teeth and began working construction full-time, only taking the summers off to continue helping his grandparents, as any loyal kin ought to do. He never stole, lied, coveted, or killed. Whatever work he did on the Sabbath was made up for by Miriam's rest for the remainder of the week, so despite the occasional quirk, Eli knew that he was a very good man.

He was a natural workhorse, preferring anything that could stimulate his ever-shifting interests and be of service to someone else. His construction job gave him enough stability in life, and the immediacy of progress afforded by the work satisfied his twitchy heart. At the end of each day he could see how the land's resources had been used against itself to erect a home atop once-undisturbed ground. Incarnations of his own hands, the works testified, to him, his capabilities.

This daily routine was invigorating enough, yet a search for the exotic always lurked in the back of his head. He saw himself as a young man of integrity but could admit (if pushed on it hard enough) that there might be a breach in his mind that made him enthusiastic about things his peers found downright odd. While his friends and coworkers let most of it go, it once took a month for him to be convinced that no one cared to share a "pet rat" and that getting a tattoo on his forehead would be a bad idea after all. But it was rare that he let his interests run away from him like that. Labor gave Eli all the source of mental stillness he needed; there was nothing like a job to make him focus.

Row after row, the hoe struck the dirt, snapping the weeds with a pleasing *whack!* that made for a rhythmic working tune. His body became one with the tool after only a few swings. He was certain that he wouldn't find a snake regardless of his sister's neurotic episode. Such was the case with her. She was afraid to do

anything that challenged her comfort. She never liked to trouble herself with sweat or toil. This snake was more of an excuse *for* her than a threat *to* her.

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After another hour of being out in the sun, Eli staggered back to the house to get some water. His grandmother had gone inside to get supper started and his sister was still sitting on the porch fixing a button on one of their grandfather's Sunday suits. He turned on the spigot knob and waited for the sputtering brown water from the hosepipe to turn into a clear, steady stream before lowering himself. He took slow gulps and lifted his head every few seconds for a breath, returning to the hose for a little longer each time. Miriam got up and walked over to the side railing. She hung halfway over and stared down at the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry I can't help you out there, Eli." She said in the sweetest voice she could don.

"Mmhmmm, codvvvben ifyahwinto," the hose replied.

"I said, 'I'm sorry I can't help you.'"

Eli lifted his head and stared straight into the wooden panels of the house. "I heard ya. I said you could if you wanted to."

"No sir, you know I'm too scared bout that snake. I wish I wasn't, but I just can't picture myself out there. It's a horrible feelin'. *Horrible*. The thing bout near killed me."

Eli turned off the spigot and looked over at the sewing supplies next to her rocking chair. He refused to acknowledge his sister's reference to the snake. "Seems like you got yerself somethin' to keep you occupied at least."

“Well, yes. Papa’s got a lot of clothes that can’t be said to be too presentable, particularly for church. Grandma’s gotten so used to it that she hasn’t paid it much mind.”

He paused for a second to look at the yard, then back at the porch, and said to the pile of clothes, “You know he’s not gonna be wearin’em much longer, if at all. The man’s got three shirts and three pants. Two’s for workin’, one’s for town. Nothin’s changed bout that since last year or the year before or the year before that. Yer wastin’ yer time.”

“No, sir! I’ve been plenty of help... But, you know what? The best thing about the past couple weeks is just bein’ up here with Grandma. We’ve talked and talked and laughed and laughed. It’s like havin’ an old friend. You should try workin’ next to Papa out there in the yard. Y’all hardly said anything to each other since you been here. ‘N fact, you’ve hardly said a word to anybody.” The disapproval that she let enter her voice made her immediately kick herself. She had conjured up this rebuke for days in her head, but demanded of herself that she give it as sweetly as possible.

Eli kept his eyes on the porch steps, “Don’t you go correctin’ me, now. I been too busy. There’s lots to do. I can’t just be yappin’ away bout nothin’ and actin’ like I’m on some vacation. These folks’re gettin’ old and we gotta help more than we used to. You’re playin’em for fools if you think they’re real happy bout you sittin’ on yer rear end all day watchin’ me work knowin’ good and well that you can help just as good if you tried a little!”

“Eli! Don’t be ugly. I’m doin’ all I can. You been so caught up in work that you’re gonna get to the pearly gates with nothin’ to show but some clipped weeds and dirt on your hands. You’re gonna lose all the memories you could’ve had if you don’t take a break and show your face once in a while.” She had rehearsed that line as well, but everything was spilling out faster, louder, and sharper than she imagined it would. This was the most they had

talked to each other in three months, and it surprised her that she could be so forward all of a sudden. It was as if his presence alone made the frustration she felt at herself for not being with him shift focus to his retort, and then to his whole self.

“Another thing, you! You hadn’t once asked me how I’m *doin’* since I saw that snake. You never once told me you’d go out and find it. You haven’t once asked me to describe it! You don’t really care if I’m out there with you or not. You WANNA be out there workin’ by yourself! You don’t respect your *kin*! You’re a worshipper of *work*! It’s *idolatry*! IDOLATERS SHALL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM, ELI!!”

Eli’s face was now altogether red, but it was impossible to tell at this point from exactly what. He looked down and exhaled all the air that was in him, as if he were trying to blow all the dirt off his boots. After another deep breath, he lifted his finger and directed his eyes straight into hers. “Now. You do what you do best an’ shut yer mouth! I’m yer big brother. Don’t... you... TALK... to me... like... that!”

He stopped himself before he could unleash a string of accusations at his sister, accusations he had built up in the quiet of his heart over the past month. She was lazy, self-absorbed, ungenerous, petty, conceited. He could go on, but he thought it best not to think on these things for too long. He considered it better at the moment to do what was right and step out from under the wrath of an angry woman. He let his gaze rest on the sun and judged there to be another hour and a half of good light to work with.

“I’m doin’ good here,” he mumbled.

And with that, he walked back up the hill.



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Before he set to hoeing again, Eli stood facing the woods, wondering what might be hiding behind the treeline. Without his consent, his thoughts ran away from him.

So what if there's a snake in here?

What if she got bit?

So what?

What if he himself were ever bitten by a snake? Maybe those cottonmouths weren't as bad as they had been told growing up. Maybe, maybe so, though. Perhaps you'd just feel the venom stream into the blood around the bite, your heart rate would speed up, you'd lay down and then feel like you were going to sleep.

Done.

Maybe that's not what it's like at all. Who cares. The worst thing that happens at the end is dying, and that's not all bad. Dying's something that everyone has to go through at one point or another, but it can't really make that big a difference if it happens at twenty years old or eighty. People come and go so often that in the grand scheme of things, sixty years doesn't make too big a difference. People always treat life as if every second is the most defining moment in history. Miriam thinks those clothes are such a big deal. Not many things in life are too frustrating, but exaggerating the little things is surely one of them. Death is the end like birth is the beginning, and it's that simple. When will people just accept the facts of life and get over it?! Hell, everybody's gonna die, and God knows I ain't about to die worryin' about it.

Eli looked up as a line of clouds started to march across the sky, bringing with them a considerable breeze that promised a storm at some point in the evening.

He had never thought sincerely about his own death. He knew it would happen, but he had never really confronted the reality in such brutal terms until now. What would he wear in the casket? *His* casket? Who would come to the funeral? Would the preacher have anything to say? What's it like not to exist? Not to breathe anymore? Not to see, hear, touch, feel, or be able to get out and do anything? He pictured himself dead. His eyes would be sunken in, face wan and gray, fingers intertwined over a Bible laid across his belly. He then thought that maybe he wouldn't die after all! Absurd as it sounds, there could be another way. Maybe they would finally discover a cure for death. Maybe he could—

"Eli! Where are you, son?" His grandfather called from somewhere unseen, interrupting his brief existential crisis.

"Over here, Papa! You need somethin'?"

"Nah, son. Just heard you stop and I's just makin' sure you didn't collapse or nothin'. Come on in the house if you get to feelin' sick!"

After a quick *Yessir!* Eli went back to his weeds, silently cursing Miriam. Were she out here, he would have been finished already.

When he looked down, he saw it.

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**I**t was stretched out full length, nearly blending in with the shade of the overgrown weeds. The cottonmouth disclosed its age with a perfectly formed triangular head and dark brown stripes. The creek was down the hill, which made it odd that it could be found

so far from the water. Then again, who was he to question a snake? His sister's rival was almost too stunning to kill. The thick body laid perfectly still in the summer heat with its cold blood running up and down underneath four feet of scales. He could easily take up his hoe right now, sever its head, and hand it over on a platter to persuade Miriam to do some work after all.

Although, were Eli to kill this creature, he would have to admit that Miriam was right. Unsure over whether he could concede to this, he leaned his hands and chin against the hoe and stared down at the back of its head.

He was in awe. He got the sense as he looked at the snake facing the opposite direction, too dignified to concern himself with Eli's presence, that an old friend was resurrected. He longed to touch it, hold it, possess it. He imagined being able to marvel at its beauty whenever it pleased him. The mere thought of it filled his heart with pride. He would be held in such esteem handling "dangerous" animals so close. Of course, no one would know that the snake wouldn't be dangerous *to him*. Eli could tell that the snake had no mind to harm him. It looked so peaceful lying there that he could tell the two could easily become an inseparable pair if only he took a moment to reach out inch by inch.

He shook his head and quickly considered how absurd this was. Were he simply to kill the beast now, it'd be one less worry around the house. He was a grown man now, and a man can admit when he's wrong. Because he was more mature than Miriam, he could fess up that the garden still had a snake but that he had killed it so now all was well. Yes, she would say *I told you so*, but he would say *I took care of it*, a phrase that pleased him just fine.

He looked back down, eyeing Majesty itself.

*What a foolish way to think about a snake*, he thought to himself.

And yet...

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Eli raised his hoe.

...whack...whack...whack...

“Damned snake.”

...whack...whack...whack...

“Damned if I never’ve seen a snake in here.”

...whack...whack...whack...

*Br. John Thomas Fisher entered the Order of Preachers in 2013. Before joining the Order, he studied Philosophy and French at the University of South Carolina.*