

Faces of Grace

by [Anna Elkins](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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*Bali & Montana*

*[A] mystery, confined in little space  
the whole world's wonder in a single face.*

—Conrad Aiken

A white bat flies into the mango tree.  
Erratic, it darts through wet leaves  
and disappears. We are left looking  
at dangling fruit dancing over the pool.  
From the rooftop restaurant two terraces  
above, the song “White Christmas” wafts down.  
My friends start singing about sleigh bells  
as we bask in the warm morning of a foreign  
December.

Then a memory flits within me—  
our family’s first winter in Montana.  
My father, younger than I am now,  
pastored a small church. For the holiday,  
he rented three, hay-filled sleighs drawn  
by draft horses. My mother stuffed my brother  
and me into Moon Boots and mittens.  
With the congregation, we sang carols  
beneath a sky of stars, horses belling forth  
on glittering snow, their breath making brief  
clouds in bright moonlight. We arrived  
to a tended bonfire and hot chocolate served  
beneath ancient firs. Around the fire, all faces  
glowed orange. But when I left the circle  
to refill my cup at a table set deeper in the trees,  
everyone became a nameless shape.

I've forgotten every face.

Wham!'s

"Last Christmas" begins, and I'm back  
at the edge of a rainforest, poolside  
beneath bougainvillea, with chicory coffee  
and my fellow teachers on winter break.  
I'm wearing a bikini I bought for a song  
in a land where you can get an hour-long  
massage for five dollars. I've forgotten the face  
of the woman who gave me that massage,  
though I recall the three-walled room,  
its fourth side wide open to the rice paddy  
and the palm tree reaching inside.  
I look down at the length of myself  
and hardly know the woman I see—  
a yard taller than the girl decades ago,  
bony and bundled in hay on a sleigh,  
not knowing *what* Bali was, let alone where—  
or where most of the world was or how  
to move through it. When I look  
at myself decades from now,

please may I

see a being who traced a path  
of grace on this earth.

Please may I

have learned more  
than geography.

Please may I

remember the faces I meet  
and the lives behind them.