Hijuelos's *Mr. Ives' Christmas* was a strong candidate. It's the story of a deeply religious man whose life becomes haunted by the murder of his son. The story depicts the man's struggle of faith against the depression and despair oppressing his decades of mourning, his anguish when finally he is called upon to meet the murderer after his release from prison, and his final grace-sustained ability to do so as a result of his faith practice over a lifetime. Hijuelos's beautiful work imaginatively displays the triumph of the human spirit sustained by Transcendence in the end. Also in the running were Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* and David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*. If you're a reader of fiction, I'm sure you can supply your own favorite list.

Finally, I needed to make a choice. Here I've chosen to focus on two stories: one a short parable and the other a novel that was itself a blessing to read.

Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"

Many have seen O'Connor's writings as shocking and ugly. She aimed at picturing the world, for all its evil and sordidness, as not absolutely depraved but as undergirded by God's grace, shot through with spiritual meaning. O'Connor used extreme images to shout this truth because she felt that her readers were deaf to transcendent meaning otherwise, "embarrassed by Mystery."[11] Many of her stories, including this one, are ironic parables through which the reader's imagination can grasp a paradoxical reality quite the opposite from the world that the characters assume to be true. And grace breaks in by surprising means, often through characters who are themselves deeply flawed and grotesque examples of near — but not absolute — depravity. Thus, a divine truth is glimpsed: God uses even the banal, the imperfect, and on occasion the truly evil ones to achieve God's ends.

The setting for this particular story is a waiting room in a doctor's office.[12] The protagonist, a Mrs. Turpin, is a classic O'Connor character, a smug, judgmental woman who sizes up everyone else in the world

11. Helpful for my discussion here was T. R. Wright's treatment of O'Connor's work in his *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1988).

12. Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 488-509.

and is thankful that she is better than most. White, middle-class, entrenched in and thus reflective of a world of racial bigotry, she is sanctimonious and utterly blind to her own narrow prejudice — in this case, aimed at "white trash" (examples of which sit with her in the waiting room) and the "niggers" she and her husband hire to take care of their small cotton crop.

In the course of a conversation between Mrs. Turpin and another woman in the waiting room, the plot builds toward a climax as the woman's college-age daughter, who is sitting with her, malevolently stares at Mrs. Turpin. Her loathing for Mrs. Turpin and all she stands for becomes palpable, and finally, when she can no longer stand Mrs. Turpin's hypocrisy, the girl hurls a book at Mrs. Turpin's head (a textbook on "human development"!), knocking her to the floor of the waiting room.

As Mrs. Turpin lies there, stunned, she finally asks the girl why she's been singled out for such violence. "'What you got to say to me?' she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation." The answer coming from the girl's mouth shakes Mrs. Turpin to the core: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."[13]

And for the rest of this story, Mrs. Turpin is haunted by those words, struggling to understand how that girl could have said such a thing to her, she who has always been nothing but the picture of kindness and decency in the self-satisfied world she has inhabited. She struggles with herself and she struggles with God — who, after all, has made her what she is.

By the last scene, where Mrs. Turpin is seen slopping her own pigs on her farm, she has worked herself into a fury. She turns on God himself with the question "Who do you think you are?" And in the following mysterious moments, with that question seemingly turned back upon herself, she gazes "as if through the very heart of mystery," and her own sense of righteous integrity begins to crumble. While staring at the pigs in the pen before her, some truth about herself and about life and about sheer reality begins to dawn on her, "as if she was absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge." At that moment, she lifts her eyes and sees the following vision:

13. O'Connor, "Revelation," p. 500.

> A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.[14]

O'Connor does not tell us whether this revelatory vision of profound reversal — the first will be last and the last will be first — makes any real difference in Mrs. Turpin's life. Even at this moment of Transcendence, she still views others in some kind of fixed hierarchy.

But readers, now imaginatively engaged with this character, are left with the sense of possibility, for Mrs. Turpin and perhaps for themselves. Maybe things aren't just what they seem; maybe just beneath the surface of life's order is another, profound God-given order which, if only we could see it and remember it, would alter our perception of and behavior toward others. The last line of the story reads, ". . . what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah."[15] Perhaps in the end we will all rejoice — even the Mrs. Turpins of the world.

Mark Salzman's Lying Awake

The setting for this novel is a Carmelite monastery near present-day Los Angeles.[16] It is the story of Sister John of the Cross, who, after more than two decades of religious life, becomes something of a celebrity. After years of spiritual dryness and plodding along within the monastery

14. O'Connor, "Revelation," pp. 507-8.
15. O'Connor, "Revelation," p. 508.
16. Mark Salzman, *Lying Awake* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

confines, she becomes a visionary, given to mystical experiences of God. When she writes about her mystical experience, her published poetry and essays bring personal recognition and monetary reward to her monastery.

Unfortunately, it turns out that Sister John's increasing "mystical experiences," accompanied by increasingly severe headaches, are manifestations of a form of temporal lobe epilepsy. She is faced with the choice of undergoing surgery and the likely loss of her visionary power, or risking increasingly severe neurological consequences that would endanger her life. This is the dilemma at the heart of Salzman's novel.

Readers, through the power of their imaginations, glimpse a world of loving and humble service beneath the everyday responsibilities of communal life. Along with Sister John, they begin to discover through the course of her illness and its treatment the true meaning of religious faith and life in a community of others that one is called to serve. Sister John's struggle is the struggle of a faith stripped bare of emotional consolation, stripped of pride in spiritual attainment, stripped of false highs amid the everydayness of life. At one point, when she is face-to-face with her dilemma, her spiritual advisor says to her, "You may feel separated from grace right now, but in reality you are probably closer to it now than you ever were before. . . . We're all better off having doubts about the state of our souls than presuming ourselves to be holy."[17]

Out of Sister John's struggle there emerges a picture of a life lived in true faith as one ultimately lived in mystery and darkness, a "doing kind of knowing" that lives out faith in living for others, hanging in there and living by faith despite doubts and everyday dryness of soul. Perhaps, as one of the sisters says to Sister John, "If we make an act of faith then [when it's all dry darkness], it counts more than on the days when we feel sure."[18] Perhaps the title, *Lying Awake,* symbolizes such living in darkness.

Toward the end of this story, while Sister John is still in the infirmary recovering from her surgery, still mourning the loss of her mystical muse, a very old nun, doubled over with osteoporosis, is serving the other sick sisters. She pauses next to Sister John's bed and says, "God

17. Salzman, *Lying Awake,* p. 125.
18. Salzman, *Lying Awake,* p. 172.