



Featuring  
Hal Paxton

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Issue 3

# Wounds

*Hal Paxton*

**D**aniel liked things without wounds.

Things unblemished, unscarred, and uninjured brought relief for his teenage mind. They were the things on which he spent precious time—not in an attempt to understand or dissect them, but for the sole purpose of escape.

The wind pulled at the seeds on the stalk of grass he held in his hand. He sat cross-legged in the middle of a vacant lot between Litchfield's only drug store on one side and the town's only law office on the other. Both buildings were owned by Attorney Canton S. Louis, Daniel's father.

Litchfield offered little for a teenager to do during the summer and Daniel's dad wasn't about to let him go off during those empty months. Frankly, the town offered little for anyone to do during any time of the year. His dad often complained of the lack of business that translated to the lack of people occupying this tiny town in the middle of nowhere. Mr. Louis swore the town started down the chute of obscurity some twenty years earlier over a number of problems that ended with the town's occupants clawing for each other's jugulars. Daniel asked his dad to tell him about it a number of times at the kitchen table, but each time his dad would just mumble something and change the subject. Mr. Louis typically followed those times with half a bottle of Jim Beam.

Daniel shifted his legs into a more comfortable position in the dirt. Pulled low over his eyes, his hoodie blocked out the sky and surroundings leaving him to focus on the seeds clinging to the end of the stalk. He yearned to reach out and touch the dormant capsules of life, but the fear of tainting them held him back.

"New life," he thought, "clean and perfect. Well, almost."

Just on the edge of the grass stalk's physical existence, woven into its essence, he could see a creeping shade of gray that wanted to be black. It had taken him two years of therapy to realize that only he could see that extra substance. He'd still be listening to those fine-talking doctors with their file folders and clipboards if he hadn't learned the value of lying, but then he could see that they too, had learned several dirty values.

Daniel could see it on everything, a taint in varied shades from off-white to black. He figured that it was something separate from whatever object it covered. But he sensed too that the creeping filth and the object were somehow one, somehow linked—though maybe not originally. He'd finally come to the sad conclusion that neither could exist outside the other. He named the extra essence "creep."

A screech of tires jerked his head around.

"What's the matter with you?" a man yelled. He sat behind the steering wheel of a rusty blue pickup truck.

Daniel glanced away from the man and cast his eyes upon the asphalt. From under his hoodie he could see the dusty feet of a little girl run in front of the truck where she skidded to a halt. She grabbed a pink ball from the road. In that glimpse Daniel spied sores on the girl's hands and arms.

The man in the truck slapped the side of his door and said, "You stupid girl! Go play somewhere else!"

The hurried footsteps of the little girl carried over to Daniel. He turned back to the stalk of grass. Two sneaker-clad feet stood before him.

"You're different."

A man's voice fell from above Daniel. It sounded like river rock under foot. Daniel clenched his jaw at the vision his extra sight gave him. Blood

stained the fabric of the man's worn sneakers, pulled to the surface by the black taint that flowed around the man. The creep was so strong that Daniel imagined he could see it with his eyes closed.

"I'm Jonas. What's your name?" Daniel heard the man pull over a forgotten car tire and sit on it. There was a pause and then the man asked, "What's the matter, boy?"

Daniel looked from under his hoodie at the man's hands. The fingers on the hands were bent at unnatural angles and lacerated as if by some dull razor blade. The open wounds were green at the edges. The man rubbed his hands up and down on the knees of his worn faded blue jeans. Daniel swallowed and looked back at the ground. The taint from the man spread out to touch and wrap around the high grass and weeds like tea seeping from a tea bag.

"Not supposed to talk to strangers, huh?" Daniel heard the man shift his weight on the tire. "I can understand that. My name's Jonas, like I said. I'm what some in these parts call a forgotten man. I pretty much go from city to city, just taking my time enjoying the world."

Daniel grunted that he was listening.

"I'm considering staying around for a while. I came through this town before, you know. I spent some time here back then," Jonas said. "It was a lot more, um... active then. Must have been fifteen or twenty-some-odd years ago."

"You okay, Daniel?" a familiar voice asked from the street.

Daniel turned and looked at James Willard. Last year James had sat next to him in Mrs. Ronald's eighth-grade German language class. He liked James, even though he found James's haunted, milky eyes so distracting. At

that moment James carried several bags of groceries, which Daniel guessed were deliveries from Mr. Willard's grocery store.

"I'm fine," Daniel called back.

James started down the sidewalk and then hesitated, looking again at Daniel and the strange man. Daniel half-waved then turned back to the man calling himself Jonas.

"Daniel. That's a fine name, you know," Jonas said.

"I guess," Daniel muttered.

"So why are you sitting all alone in this vacant lot?"

Some of the seeping taint from the man drew closer and Daniel pushed himself back across the ground. The dry grass crunched under his hand.

"So I'm right," Jonas said. "You are different."

"Different?" he asked. "I'm no different than anyone else."

Daniel knew that wasn't a lie. He used to study his reflection for hours. The creep did to him the same thing it did to everyone.

"Except that you see it," Jonas said.

Daniel looked up at Jonas. Bile rose to his throat and forced him to swallow before he gagged on it. Jonas' eyes were black orbs, his face a rotten corpse with skin that hung loose and tattered. Open wounds oozed a greenish-yellow puss. The sight filled Daniel with sorrow. Sorrow, not because of the images the creep brought to life, but because underneath that corpse he could see the face that everyone else viewed, haggard and worn, but alive and not in the pain he should be experiencing.

Daniel looked again at the ground. "I don't see anything."

"Lie all you want. Though it just turns your tongue black with it. I know you see it. That mysterious element, that parasite upon nature, that weaves and joins to the fibers of everything."

Daniel stopped himself from looking again at Jonas.

"Been institutionalized, ain't you?" Jonas asked.

"No."

"Hmm. Psychologists?"

He nodded and his hoodie slipped further over his eyes.

"I see you learned to lie to them."

He crossed his arms. Daniel knew what Jonas saw on his face.

"Must be smart. Smarter than me. I spent four years in the asylum, you know." Jonas swore and then spit on the ground. "Took me a while to catch on."

Daniel flinched; he knew what that word would do to Jonas's face.

Jonas continued unperturbed, "You think folk look bad out here in small town America?" He swore again. "You should see the inside of an asylum. That's where I met another like me. Like us. I can see it in you, you know. If you know what to look for you could probably see it in me, though by now...maybe it's so buried and twisted that you can't."

Daniel steeled himself and then looked Jonas over from head to foot. The creeping filth ate away at every inch of the man. He couldn't find what set him apart from everyone else.

"Pretty, ain't I?" Jonas said.

Daniel shivered, tightened his arms against his body, and then looked back at the dust of the earth. "What do you want?" he asked.

Jonas grunted. "Nothing. Just saw you sitting here when passing and figured I might be able to help or something."

"Can you take it away?"

Jonas laughed. "Why? Don't you know what you've got here?"

"A curse."

"Maybe. Or maybe you've got your ticket to wealth, wine, and women—or men if that's your thing, I can't quite tell yet."

Daniel frowned. "What?"

"I can show you how to use it. To read what you see and turn it to your advantage."

Jonas paused and sucked in a fevered breath.

"You have no idea," he continued, "just how powerful this...this...gift, or if you like, this hiccup by the universe is. You have no idea the marvelous things you can accomplish with it."

The pit of Daniel's stomach clenched in fear and loathing. "But I don't want it."

"It killed him, you know."

Daniel looked into Jonas eyes. "What?"

"The guy like us. The one I met in the asylum. He didn't want it."

Fear washed over Daniel. The black creep around Jonas swirled like smoke touched by a gust of wind.

"Because he didn't want it?" Daniel asked.

"In a manner of speaking." Jonas tilted his head. "He refused to accept it. I think it was partly the woman he fell in love with." Jonas shrugged with a sigh.

Daniel concentrated, trying to see past the horrific image of Jonas's face to the man beneath.

"Something changed her and the sight of it pushed him over the edge. Literally." Jonas made a diving motion with his hand. "It was messy."

Daniel shivered again. He didn't like this man. He pushed himself off the ground and dusted off his hands leaving a smear of dirt and creep on his blue jeans.

"You leaving me?"

"I'm supposed to meet someone," Daniel said.

"Ah. You just lied to me." Jonas touched his lips. "I can tell. It's better than a lie detector, you know."

Daniel felt his face warm under his blush.

"It's okay. I'll be around here for a while I think. If you change your mind, you'll find me." Jonas saluted and then pushed off the tire with a groan. He turned and walked across the empty lot, picking his way around dead shrubs and then through a broken gate into the alley.

Daniel looked at the creep Jonas left behind on the tire and the surrounding area. It undulated in the air like oil pushed by waves on the ocean. He knew most of it would dissipate like dew under the glare of the rising sun. But some would stay behind, a fingerprint of sorts, insinuating itself into the very fiber of the real world.

He headed for the sidewalk and stopped when James appeared in a hurried trot minus the grocery bags he'd delivered to someone.

James looked at Daniel standing in the empty lot. The creep on James puzzled Daniel. It jerked and pulled away from his body in what looked to Daniel like an attempt at escape. Then in a blink it would switch and lick up and down his body like a flame on a wick. Underneath it Daniel could see that confusion worked across James's face.

"You okay?" James asked.

Daniel hurried to the sidewalk. "That's what I was about to ask you."

James shrugged and looked back the way he came. "I dropped some groceries off to Widow MacGannis. She doesn't get out anymore, but she's changed somehow this last year."

James paused and ran a hand through his red hair.

"And?"

"And I don't know." James shrugged again. "She said something to me. It made me think. You know what I mean? Think about myself, about things I've done, things I regret."

Daniel stared at him. The creep expanded in a dark balloon around James for the span of a breath. It snapped back upon his body and tightly swirled around James, blurring the normal images Daniel saw.

"I've not seen that guy around here before," James said.

"A tramp. He made me think, too," Daniel said. "He looked like a man with a lot of baggage in his past. But I don't think he regrets any of it. Not anymore anyway. I think he's beyond regret."

James looked at his hands and for a moment Daniel thought he saw the taint of the creep turning his fingers black and dead.

"Is that a good thing?" James asked.

Daniel glanced up the street. There were a few cars parked in front of the drugstore and grocer next to that, but the town was quiet. He felt like the spirit of the town waited at a crossroads. He glanced behind at the tire. The creep from Jonas still lingered. The thought occurred to him that maybe it was his spirit that waited at the crossroads.

"No," he said. "No, I don't think that's such a good thing."

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Hide your face. You never look at anyone for more than a second," James said. "In fact, I've seen more of your face right now than I normally see in a week."

Daniel shrugged.

James kicked at a pebble, sending it tinkling to a stop in the street gutter.

"I think I need to go back and talk to the widow." James turned and headed back up the sidewalk, his pace slow and burdened.

Daniel watched him walk away and the creep ballooned again, then clamped down on James in hungered fury. For an instant he wanted to follow, his curiosity was piqued by this new and strange characteristic of the creep. "Maybe I should talk to this Jonas," he thought to himself. He looked at his wristwatch. His dad demanded promptness. "No sense adding to dad's creep."

The night at the dinner table was typical. His dad expounded on his need to find a summer job. Daniel mumbled half-promises around an overstuffed mouth. He couldn't stand being in the same room with his dad for long and seeing the horror of what the creep brought to the surface of his father. Following several gulps of Coke, he pushed away from the table and sulked his way to his room where he lay in bed listening to the soothing sounds of jazz groups like Spryo-Gyra and Hiroshima.

One solitary item sat on the nightstand beside his bed, a photograph of his smiling mother holding in a tight hug a four-year-old version of himself. He caressed his cheek remembering how her long brown hair tickled his face when she kissed him. He swiped at a tear before it slid down his face. Things were good when she was alive.



Daniel sat in the vacant lot with his back against the wall of his dad's law office. A shrub, more tangled stems and branches than leaves, hid him from the street. He held up the flower of a weed between his index finger and thumb. The creep from his hand licked up the stem and around the petals. Sometimes it reminded him of flames in a slow hypnotic dance and sometimes of slugs searching for food.

"You won't find any answers there, you know. Nature is pretty much ambivalent, though infected nonetheless."

Daniel frowned and let the flower fall between his crossed legs.

"Thought anymore about my offer?" Jonas asked.

"What's in it for you?"

Jonas put his hands out like he was warding off an attack. Daniel's frown deepened.

"Hey, can't an old man want to help his fellow man?"

"Do I look that dumb?" Daniel asked.

"Fine. If you're going to be that way you can learn the hard way."

Daniel squirmed against the wall. Jonas didn't move, but the creep slithered around him on the ground and surrounding garbage.

"You ever see it balloon around someone?" Daniel asked.

Jonas's face tightened and he stepped back. "You?"

"Why? Is it bad?"

Jonas shook himself. "Remember that man I told you about yesterday?"

Daniel nodded once.

"The woman. He saw that in her, then death happened."

The dark creep around Jonas vibrated making Daniel think a chill swept through it. He felt fear tickle the pit of his stomach.

"What was that?"

"What?" Jonas asked.

Daniel pointed to the black creep oozing along the ground around Jonas. "Just now, when you spoke of that woman, it vibrated."

Jonas shook his head. "I missed it I guess. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

Daniel watched his lips to see if he lied. The creep didn't change his image. He pushed away from the wall and stood up.

Jonas stepped back.

Daniel paused and weighed the old man again with a look. After a moment he headed for the street.

"Where you going?"

"To check on my friend."

"Maybe I should go with you."

Daniel spun around. "No!"

Jonas raised his hands in acquiescence. Daniel turned and ran.

Within five minutes he stood before the Willard home. Unlatching the gate, Daniel hurried up the cobbled stones and rang the doorbell. After a moment James's mom opened the door. She stood behind the screen door with a smile behind the mask of scars that only Daniel could see. The taint drew his eyes to her midriff where his vision exposed a black wound. Blood stained her sweatshirt emblazoned with kitty cats batting at a butterfly.

"Yes?" she asked. "It's Daniel right? Did you want to see James?"

Daniel looked away from her stomach and into her face. He was struck by an odd sight. Her ears were clear of the creep. "Yes, ma'am. Is James here?"

She pushed open the screen door and stepped aside to let him in. As he walked past her the creep around her ballooned and then snapped back. He stutter-stepped and glanced at her again.

"What's wrong, Daniel?"

Daniel cleared his throat. "I...I was just looking at your kitty cats."

She smiled. "Cute, huh? James bought this for me last year on Mother's Day. I like to wear it around the house. His father likes to keep it cool. Meat-manager mentality."

Mrs. Willard walked past him into the living room. "He's in the backyard."

She slid the glass door open and waved him into the backyard. An aboveground pool caught Daniel's eye first. He ran up to it with fear and looked over the edge. The thought skipped across his mind that his vision might mean James would try to drown himself.

The water dazzled and reflected the sun with such brilliance that he shielded his eyes. But he couldn't look away. Never before had he witnessed such brilliant, clean water. The creep did not exist in it. It defined purity and it flooded Daniel with desire and revulsion.

"Daniel?"

The voice carried across the pool, but Daniel couldn't tear his face away from the water.

"Man, ain't you ever seen a pool before?"

He jumped at the touch on his shoulder and turned to see James.

"Hey, are you okay?" James asked.

Daniel's knees buckled and he collapsed against the side of the pool, sliding to the ground. James stood before him perfect and whole. The sight stole his breath. Every fiber of James, from his hair to his clothes, vibrated with an inward, unspoiled light that made Daniel's eyes tear.

When James reached out a helping hand Daniel's heart raced in fear. Something within him wanted to run to the ends of the earth to escape, but he resisted.

"No!" Daniel said. "Don't touch me, it'll get on you."

James hesitated, brow furrowed. "What will?"

"The creep."

"Dude, what are you talking about?"

"You can't see it, no one but me can. And that old guy."

"Daniel, are you okay? Are you on something? Did that creepy tramp give you drugs?"

Daniel sighed, pulled his knees to his chest, and rested his head against the pool.

After a deep breath he said, "You've changed."

James smiled. "Changed?"

"Yeah." Daniel nodded. "You're different. It's like you're some kind of new...I don't know, just new."

James laughed and sat beside Daniel. "You have no idea what I was before."

The inner light from James burned like a furnace with an intensity that made the hairs on Daniel's arm tingle. He fought against the primal desire to bolt like a fawn hiding from a lion on the African savanna. Daniel had to look away.

"How?" Daniel's question sounded like a strangled croak.

"Jesus," James said. "I discovered Jesus Christ. No! That's not right." A smile lit his face. "He found me. I'm born again, Daniel, remade. The old me is dead, the one covered in filthy sin and death. That me is gone. Widow MacGannis and some guy who used to live here twenty years ago showed Jesus to me. Do you know what Jesus did so that we could really truly live?"

Daniel listened to James tell of what this Jesus suffered upon some piece of wood so that he could be redeemed and reunited with the Creator of everything. It sounded so absurd, but a longing filled his soul and a weight pressed upon his spirit that threatened to overwhelm and swallow him. He saw the creep on himself balloon and threaten to explode before snapping tight upon his body again. Fear clawed at his mind and emotions.

With tears blurring his vision he threw his hoodie back and looked into James's clear eyes. "I want Jesus."

James clapped his hands and he led Daniel in a simple prayer seeking forgiveness from and acceptance of Jesus as his Savior. In the core of his being Daniel sensed a fire burst into existence. His body began to itch and burn. He looked at his hands. The creep and the sores withered and dried leaving behind a fine, black soot that fell from him whenever he moved. He scrubbed his hands and arms and shook loose the soot revealing his untainted flesh.

James clapped him on his back.

A joy not his own rocked Daniel's frame and filled his soul with an unquenchable flame.

"I feel...how did you describe it? Remade!" he said.

"I know! Isn't it awesome?"

"Now what do I do?"

James paused in thought and then his eyes sparkled. "Want to get baptized? That friend of the widow's came over today and baptized me in the pool. It's what a believer does after accepting Jesus."

Daniel sprang from the ground and climbed the pool stairs. "Absolutely!" He jumped into the pool with a splash.

James climbed the ladder and eased himself into the water telling Daniel exactly how he had been baptized. Daniel grabbed the arm James offered when he placed his hand over Daniel's mouth and nose. In a swift motion James dunked Daniel under the sparkling pool water.

When Daniel came up he watched the dust from the dried-up creep slough off and dissolve into the water. A stigmatic cloud spread throughout the pool and destroyed the water's beauty like a ravenous cancer. The soiling of the crystal clean water brought an ache to his heart. But before he could dwell on it the water changed to thick rich blood and then to dazzling crystal-clear water again.

He stood there, blinking the water from his eyes and for a moment he glimpsed the face of Jonas twisted in hatred and peering over the backyard privacy fence. Then Jonas dropped behind the wooden fence and disappeared.

Daniel turned to James and smiled. "Show me more."

"Wait till you see His words," James said.



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Hal Paxton is the son of an Advent Christian Pastor and lives in the Tampa Bay area. He has a Bachelors Degree in Creative Writing from the University of South Florida. In the 2004, Hal's short story, "The Package," was a finalist in the WORLDview Fiction Contest. A number of Hal's short stories and articles have appeared online in webzines *Infuze* and *Cheers*. Hal also maintains the weblog, *TheGreatSeparation.com*, which he started in July of 2003 with a focus on the wider separation developing between Christians and the current culture. He current project is finding a publisher for his novel, "Sins of Our Fathers."

You can read more at < [www.sinsofourfathers.com](http://www.sinsofourfathers.com) >.



Cover: "The Gatherers"

*The children of Time search the universe for life.*

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