



this  
beautiful  
truth

How God's Goodness Breaks  
into Our Darkness

SARAH CLARKSON

“This is a quiet memoir, more friendship than history, more companionship than autobiography. Sarah is vulnerable with her story, showing beauty to be the heroine and truth, the bulwark. We need more stories like this in the world, more humans willing to carry their readers with them on their own journey through the dark nights we all live and sometimes love and will someday leave.”

**Lore Ferguson Wilbert**, author of *Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*

“From inside the darkness, Sarah Clarkson writes of a light that shines. She pulls the curtain back on her struggle with a particular kind of mental illness, offering not simply a theology of suffering and hope but a portrait of God’s grace in the midst of our brokenness. Beautiful in its prose and in the love it reveals, this book is a balm to a world weary of evil.”

**Glenn Packiam**, associate senior pastor, New Life Church;  
author of *Blessed Broken Given*

“I read Sarah Clarkson’s book through grateful tears. When we are weighed down by painful questions, it is stories we need most, not answers. Sarah bravely and generously shares her own particular story in a book that is filled to the brim with truth, goodness, and beauty. Sarah has a gift for making abstract ideas real and tangible. I didn’t read about hope in these pages. Instead, I was offered it.”

**Christie Purifoy**, author of *Placemaker* and *Roots and Sky*

“Sarah Clarkson has risked a great deal in writing this book. She has loved her reader enough to tell the unvarnished, complicated truth about a tormented life. In exploring her dark battles with OCD, she lays down her life so that others might live. The space she creates here is so intimate, so honest, that I found myself barely breathing as I read. The power of pure authenticity sits in these pages, and God met me in that bareness. Clarkson does not offer a shallow, escapist treatise on beauty but a raw glimpse

into the cosmic battle between goodness and evil—through the lens of a single trembling mortal soul, learning to hope and believe while living dead center in the war zone.”

**Rebecca K. Reynolds**, author of *Courage, Dear Heart*

“Few of us can return from the edge of the abyss in our own selves; fewer still are those who are able to recount at all what we have seen there. But rarer still is the one who can retell it truthfully while casting the shadows there into light. Sarah Clarkson has written that tale with courage, grace, and defiant hope. If you have ever needed to hear why beauty heals the brokenhearted, here is the telling. This is the book I have been waiting for my whole life. It may be for you too.”

**Lancia E. Smith**, founder and executive director  
of the Cultivating Project

“*This Beautiful Truth* is not only a beautifully written book; it is also an incredibly brave book—brave in its determination to stare down the darkness and bear witness to the light that tells a truer story, and brave also in its raw vulnerability. By chronicling her harrowing private battle with mental illness and its attendant feelings of guilt, shame, confusion, and doubt, Sarah Clarkson has cracked open her heart on paper so that others with broken hearts might find echoes of their own pain and know they are not alone.”

**Jennifer Trafton**, author of *Henry and the Chalk Dragon* and  
*The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic*

“Here is theology grounded in experience. In her beautiful and fluent prose, Sarah weaves a message of hope amidst brokenness that lifts our horizons. This book will open your eyes to beauty in myriad ways that are both breathtaking and mysterious in their power to heal.”

**Rev. Dr. Liz Hoare**, director of welfare, pastoral care, and  
spirituality at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

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SARAH CLARKSON



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Sarah Clarkson, *This Beautiful Truth*

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For Thomas,  
my eucatastrophe.

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# Foreword

I had a bit of a sense of déjà vu while reading this book. Every year at Wycliffe, we hold a creative writing competition, named after Frederick Buechner and funded by the Frederick Buechner Center. And every year that Sarah was a student at Wycliffe, one entry would jump out at me as of an outstandingly impressive quality and depth.

I had the same experience when marking academic papers. We have a policy of double-blind marking at Oxford, which is meant to ensure that the markers never know whose script they are marking. The sheer quality of writing that confronted the marker of Sarah's papers made that well nigh impossible!

The same quality of writing and depth of feeling pulsate from the pages of this book. It is a beautifully written book about the power (and ultimate source and goal) of beauty. There are few more important—or urgent—topics. The church has rightly proclaimed God as Love—the understanding of God as Trinity has enabled and compelled it to see the giving and receiving of love as essential to God's very being. The church has rightly proclaimed Christ as the Truth—the one whose

utter freedom from the distorting effects of self-promotion enables him to see things as they truly are and, indeed, enables all things to be what they are. (All self-promotion warps both the self and all those with whom the self comes into contact, squeezing them out of their proper shape; that which is free from all self-promotion does the opposite.)

But the church has largely forgotten that God is also Beauty. It has ceased to be the patron of the arts that it once was. It has assumed that ugly buildings can proclaim God as well as beautiful ones can—or, worse still, has failed to notice or mind the difference.

And the result is that when people have had an experience of Beauty and been moved and healed and transformed by it, they have not known it was God they have encountered. Our failure to proclaim God as Beauty has deprived our generation of one of the key codes that might have helped them to decipher the meaning of their own lives. Our failure to proclaim God as Beauty has largely removed one of the most important ways in which people recognize God's enriching, deepening, humanizing, and healing presence in their lives and respond to it.

This warm and radiant book unpolemically corrects that deficiency. It testifies to the power of Beauty. It speaks the name of Beauty. It sings the praise of Beauty. And it does so beautifully.

Beauty is scarce in so much of our landscape. But we are still made for it. We still need it. We still crave it. We still respond to it when we come across it. This book will help us to know that experience for what it is—not just aesthetic but relational. Not an encounter with something but with Someone. Hence the warmth.

The very title of this book reminds us that beauty and truth are not different things. Truth is beautiful and beauty is truthful

because they are both immediate aspects of the Love upon which all things depend. Therefore, our lived proclamation of God needs to be truthful, loving, and beautiful if it is to act as a pathway.

Because our proclamation of God must be truthful, loving, and beautiful, it must never implicate God in the untruthfulness, hatefulness, and ugliness of evil. It must never attribute evil to the intention of God. As we see in the miracles of Jesus, God is against suffering. In the person of Jesus, he has assaulted it. Whenever we see Jesus and suffering together, we see him undoing it. We therefore have no warrant for saying that suffering is ever divinely desired or intended. Theologically, that impugns the goodness and love of God. Pastorally, that makes God a suffering or grieving person's enemy. Psychologically, it forces us to twist our minds into accepting that bad is actually good. This book is a plea to present God as the healer and never the inflictor of our pain.

It is thus a book of pastoral wisdom and love, of autobiographical honesty and vulnerability, of artistic sensitivity and passion, of human gentleness and compassion. Above all, perhaps, it is a book of wonderful warmth, and it inspires me to greater creativity, homeliness, and holiness in what Sarah calls the ordinary of life.

Michael Lloyd

# Beautiful or Broken

## *The Rival Stories of the World*

“Listen to me,” cried Syme with extraordinary emphasis. “Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—”

G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Swift, swift, the flit and leap of the butterfly and my headlong chase after her through the dry grass in the high summer heat. Again and again I thought my hands would gently close on her fragile wings, but always the little “buckeye” disappeared. I would crouch in wait until suddenly the earth somewhere near me would seem to slip apart in a flash of orange and azure as my butterfly leapt from the ground to lead the chase afresh. I

ran breathlessly after, tireless, taut, and wildly joyous in a way that defied my nine-year-old vocabulary to express.

I had butterfly mania that summer. My family had just moved to a new home in the far reaches of Texas Hill Country. We lived with my grandmother on two hundred acres of cedar and dry grass casually named “the ranch” (the name much fancier than the place). In our first days we children had been strictly warned not to venture too casually into the fields, where all sorts of “critturs” awaited us: rattlesnakes and copperheads, fire ants, hornets’ nests, and the teensy pests called “chiggers” that had already left angry patterns of crimson and itching bumps across my legs.

I obeyed until early one morning in our first month when I discovered a dewy-winged marvel of a creature in my grandmother’s garden, all midnight black and iridescent blue with circles of white that glimmered up at me like eyes. I ran in fiery excitement to get my grandmother. And “Oh, it’s a swallowtail,” she said nonchalantly—as if this creature, like a tiny seraph or faerie queen from the realm of myth, was a matter of the everyday. She marched inside and pulled an old Audubon guide off the shelf. It became my obsessive study as I immersed myself in the world of tiger and spicebush swallowtails, fritillaries and buckeyes, painted ladies, and that rare blue ghost, the Diana. The names, the rare, gleaming colors seemed to open an otherworld of beauty that made me hungry for something I couldn’t name. That hunger drew me past caution or even guilt (which as a first child I was so very quick to heed) into the crackle and whirl of the yellow light, the searing heat, and the grasshopper symphony of the summer fields.

That particular day I didn’t even realize how far I’d run as I chased my buckeye through the fields. I was drawn farther

and farther up and into the golden world, the next hillock of grass, the next stand of squat, brown cedars. Until my breath ran out. I remember sinking to the dirt then, knees knobbled by the pebbles, laughing after my fifth attempt to catch the little thing. I was delighted in the hunt after that beauty, the way it flashed out, an unexpected grace in the brown landscape, the way it made me hungry and happy all at once. My breath slowed. The pounding of my blood eased in my ears and I sat back on my heels, alert and still.

Abruptly, and more completely than I can describe, my sense of time was suspended as I lifted my face to the great blue dome of the Texas sky, brimmed with the honey-tinged light of late afternoon. The sounds of the earth grew distant, and a quiet came into my mind and body. For one mesmerizing moment I became aware of the personal, present goodness thrumming in every atom of the world around me. I knew that this was the beauty whose presence I yearned to touch in the mystical beauty of those butterfly wings. I knew that I was encountering God. And I knew, with a knowledge as pervasive within me as my own heartbeat, that I was loved, loved, loved.

The next instant the buzz of the cicadas and the far-off cough of a pickup roared back into my ears, and time stomped forward and I was a sunburned little girl with grass stains on her jeans, chasing butterflies. But I felt as if the brown wings of the cosmos itself had fluttered open as I chased the small beauty of the butterfly, and what I glimpsed was the mesmerizing beauty of Love, a beauty stronger and more real than anything else I knew. This, I knew in my bones, is my story.

Until a dark night, probably just a few weeks later though I cannot now exactly remember.

I had been kissed and put to bed as usual by my parents. I lay in the darkness, waiting for the usual descent of sleep. But my brain seemed strangely wired; my thoughts came faster and faster and they began to careen toward images of horror that terrified me. My heart beat hard. I closed my eyes, but that was no help. My imagination ran at frenzied speed, peopling the room I couldn't now see with evil shapes and images. I opened my eyes in desperation. But my imagination flung scene after scene into my mind, images that baffle and disgust me to this day.

I still find it hard to write about the obsessive, intrusive images that have plagued me throughout my life and came to me first, as brief portents of a total breaking to come, in that darkness (though I think they had come in dreams before). I tried to describe them to my mom when I was young, but even then I was too ashamed to give full description to the violent, perverted ideas and pictures that came—unbidden, unsought, undreamed of—from out of some void inside my own brain, wrapping themselves around my inner pictures of the people I loved most in the world. I covered my face, trying to physically beat back the thoughts. But I couldn't. I felt attacked and guilty, terrified and contaminated. And in those dark nights, the pervasive reality that suffused my being was my sense of being broken and guilty of my own breaking, attacked and somehow contaminated by my own terror.

The episode I experienced that night in its fullness for the first time was a warning shot by a mind on the edge of breaking. It would be eight more years before I was diagnosed with a lesser-known form of OCD, when stress and hormones complicated my body and triggered the full expression of my mental illness at seventeen. But the absolute nature of that darkness, the caged, sticky sense of having evil resident inside the closed rooms of my

own imagination—evil that contaminated everything I loved, that seemed to devour my hope and innocence, that sought to reset the horizons of my identity—that I tasted first as a small child. And in the shadowed agony of those nights in my bed, I immediately knew its radical power, its intended threat to the story told into my being by my recent encounter with beauty.

Even at nine years old, I recognized that the darkness I saw and the despair it worked within me presented a powerful narrative about existence: it closed the horizons of hope by caging me in with fear; it cut me off from relationship as I drew away in shame from others; it told me that the bleak, shattered reality I experienced was the ultimate reality of the world and of my guilty, miserable self. I remember in the days that followed feeling cut off from the beauty—the endless fields, the countless butterflies to be chased—by the grey, dulled sense of the darkness I had tasted and the guilt it birthed in me. I could no longer feel that great, golden heartbeat of Love. I remember the confused, childish grief I felt as I wondered within myself how to tell which potent, insistent narrative was true. And why God didn't come to tell me himself. Thus, in that marvelous and terrifying summer of my little girlhood, I was introduced to the rival stories of the world.

Beautiful or broken? Despair or hope? Evil or love?

I've been trying to answer those questions ever since. I've been trying to decide which story is true. And I think this is the fight to which each of us is called every day of our lives.

For we all experience both perspectives, often from littlest childhood. The story of shattering, of course. We bear within ourselves the narratives of our rejection and disease, our stories marred by loss and struggle. Abandonment, abuse, miscarriage and divorce, tsunamis and unexpected cancer—these are the

daily, pervasive, personal realities we taste and touch. And the story they tell us is of a world so evil, so shattered and grieved that we wonder how goodness could ever have been. In the shadow sight it sets upon us, we think of things like beauty or hope, story or song as frivolities that only distract us from the single, great reality of our grief.

The question we have to ask, of course, is where God dwells in the midst of all this sorrow. Faith in a great, untouchable Good is the realm in which we are supposed to find hope for all this fallenness. If we have grown up in some form of the Christian faith, we often have a bone-deep sense that suffering is a test, a season in which we must grip harder to our belief, and for a while, sometimes, that is possible. We may have a vague idea that God is “in control” (whatever we mean by that) so that what happens to us is “his will.” We so often confront profound suffering with a list of doctrinal tenets and assertions that are meant, I think, to stave off that yawning terror of inexplicable destruction. We don’t want to feel fragile. We don’t want to believe that God would let evil happen to us.

And yet he does. Evil in our minds and to our bodies. Evil in the actions of others and the ravages of a disordered cosmos. Evil growing up in our own impulses, our own tangled yearning. And sometimes the evil is so great and the grief so destructive that we are drawn by our pain into a wild, trackless realm where the neat explanations and the trim, sermon-sized assertions we used to keep terror at bay no longer protect us. Like Job, we are drawn into the strange, bleak landscape of God’s seeming silence as we grapple with the kind of pain that could unravel us altogether.

Just after I began my battle with the OCD that would decimate my interior world and cripple my first foray into adult-

hood, I watched a beloved church go through a painful and bitter split. I watched my parents suffer the unjust, immature vitriol of two leaders who decided they had all the answers and anyone who didn't agree was no longer welcome. My sister began to have terrifying attacks of nocturnal asthma that my mom battled for hours in the midnight dark as my father worked away five nights a week. We lost our community. Within the year, we moved. And just before we did, I overheard a woman say to my mother, "Of course I feel sorry for you, but I can't really, because this is God's will, all of it, and he's using it for his glory."

Those words haunted me: ah, they do still. They severed what had been my last line of scrappy but radiant trust in God's love, in beauty, that held me sane throughout the dark episodes of my childhood. God's will? How was this an answer or comfort to the loss and confusion I felt? How was this any help to the world's suffering, to the school shootings and refugee crises and acts of terror that filled the headlines I began to obsessively follow? Before long, as you'll see, OCD came upon me in full, and my faith began to unravel along with everything else. How could I trust a god who chose and willed the agony of the world, the intimate destruction of my mind, the hurt of my parents, the bitterness of the church? The great, golden beauty I had known in my childhood seemed to me, then, an illusion, and God became one more broken thing lying in the darkness and yearning of my heart.

Until a feast thrown by the unlikeliest of friends helped me to remember the gentleness of a kindhearted Savior. Until a mighty story invaded my imagination and summoned me to answer for my hope. Until the touch and patience of those around me filled me with the knowledge of God's long, long

suffering love. Until . . . I encountered beauty. Beauty in person and garden, art and song, story and starlight. A beauty that spoke of a reality beyond the touch of darkness. A beauty as pervasive again as that moment in my childhood. A beauty that summoned me to its own truth, that challenged me to journey beyond the flatlands of cynicism into the mountain ranges of a difficult and chosen hope.

Like Job, I was called into the wilderlands of mystery: the wild reality of a broken world where evil happens and God battles by laying down his life in love. Like Job, I was called out of the closed rooms of my neat expectations or pat theological assumptions, past my doubt and terror of God into the great battle and journey of living in a fallen world still invaded, pervaded, and beloved by the Creator who comes to draw all things back to health by his own unbearable breaking. Like Job too, I was summoned to an encounter with Beauty himself.

For just like Job, whose suffering was answered by the spectacle of God's vast creation (morning stars singing and oceans bound behind ancient doors and storehouses of snow and all the creatures great and small), I believe we are mightily and achingly addressed by beauty. I believe God cries out to us in our grief in the potent language of image and experience, answering our pain not with the explanations we may crave but with an experience of his goodness so tangible that we know hope, not as a proposition we speak but a burning in the blood, a tingling of the skin.

Beauty. That's the second story I truly believe we are all told in one way or another.

For beauty comes to us all in moments that unravel our cynical surety as our hearts seem to come apart at the touch of some odd slant of light on an evening walk. Or we hear the strained

thread of some beloved old music that seems to break the spell of doubt. We read a novel, a story of someone who forgave or fought or hoped, and we feel something stir to life as precious, as fragile, as urgent as a newborn child within us. We are encountered by beauty, and suddenly the story of our grief seems to be the passing thing—that faint, ghostly illusion that one day will melt in the beams of a great, inexorable love.

My deep belief is that beauty has a story to tell, one that was meant by God to speak to us of his character and reality, meant to grip our failing hands with hope. We know God when we behold his beauty, when his goodness invades the secret rooms of our hearts. To believe the truth that beauty tells: this is our great struggle from the depths of our grief. To trust the hope it teaches us to hunger toward: this is our fierce battle. To craft the world it helps us to imagine: this is our creative, death-defying work. This book is the story of my battle to get my hands round beauty and hold to it through all the great and changing grief I have known. This is the song of hope I sing from out of the midst of my own darkness.

Beauty and brokenness told me two different stories about the world.

I believe that Beauty told true.

This is the story it told.