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Hallelujah for the Cross, He is Ever Faithful

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BUILDING A WORLDVIEW
ABIGAIL WISSE
Editor’s Foreword

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO ART AND LITERATURE: A VERY SHORT GUIDE TO IMAGES AND TEXTS

ANDREW GRAFF

HOW DO ART AND LITERATURE GLORIFY GOD?

The Lord said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.” (Exodus 31: 1-5)

To understand the role of art in the hands of a Christian artist, begin by asking this: How does a bridge, built by a Christian engineer, glorify God? The bridge is a thing well made, trustworthy, beautiful and purposeful in its own way, and crafted by a Christian who can be salt and light in the spheres of influence God gives him. Art and literature glorify God in the same way. Paintings and poems are things well made, the arts a vocational and Spirit filled calling in which Christians can be salt and light. We design and craft, cut and carve, filled with the Spirit of God.

A common expectation is that artworks and literature must somehow preach in the same way sermons preach: Presenting the gospel.
entirely or explicitly, using Scripture or the Christian walk as a constant subject matter, etc. This expectation is mistaken. To ask an artwork to preach the way a sermon preaches is akin to asking a bridge to preach the way a sermon preaches. Bridges can’t preach, and we don’t expect them to. Bridges are the wrong medium for writing sermons. The same is true for artworks. But that’s not to say bridges and artworks have no evangelical function whatsoever. They simply function differently. For example, the abstract artwork of 21st century artist Makoto Fujimura does little to preach in the sense we often think of preaching. However, his non-representational artwork does speak exceedingly well the language of his medium, the language of artists, and has allowed Makoto—a sincere and vocal Christian—to be salt and light within an international art community that might otherwise have none at all. Makoto designs and crafts, cuts and carves, filled with the Spirit of God. Makato is salt and light. His paintings are his bridges.

But what of subject matter, and message? Christian writer and thinker Gene Veith provides a great way of thinking about the art and literature produced by Christians:

It is not that authors are deliberately writing about their philosophy in life…rather they are writing about exciting stories or love or tragedy or something funny. Nevertheless, in doing so, they are presenting their subjects through the lens of their particular view of the world, that is, through their worldview (“Reading and Writing Worldview” 2002).

In the Cedarville Review, you will find artworks depicting subject matters that are exciting, lovely, tragic, and perhaps funny, too. We can best respond to these works by understanding the spirit in which they were created. Each work was produced by a Christian artist in various stages of training, working within the language of a specific medium. The subject matter may vary to surprising degrees, but if we look close enough we will find that the presentation and treatment of subject matter is similar. Each work has a Christian worldview behind it. And each work can be viewed as a well-built bridge bringing Christian voice into wide spheres of influence.
HOW IS ART’S SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLE CONTENT EDIFYING?

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12 – 14)

Consider the relief and edification that comes from learning that another in the body of Christ struggles in the same way we struggle—a similar season of doubts, a shared weight of anxiety, a fear of man, a grappling with recurrent temptations. In bold and honest and forgiving community, we find great comfort and tremendous growth. Art and literature depicting uncomfortable content can often offer this same sort of confessional partnership. To immerse oneself in art and literature is like taking a field trip through fellow hearts and minds. And to meet fellow hearts and minds, share in their triumphs and messes, can both comfort and sharpen. To hide behind fig leaves is alienating, and neither true nor right. But how is the Christian artist to approach difficult subjects in his work? Can he depict dark subject matter? Can he write a story about doubts and fears, about the failings of the flesh, about people behaving in less than Christ-like ways? Francis Schaeffer, in his essay “Perspectives on Art” presents a balanced and Christian answer:

The Christian worldview can be divided into what I call a major and a minor theme…First, the minor theme is the abnormality of the revolting world…if we are at all honest, we must admit that in this life there is no such thing as totally victorious living. In every one of us there are those things which are sinful and deceiving and, while we may see substantial healing, in this life we do not come to perfection. The major theme is the opposite of the minor; it is the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life…God is there, God exists.

In these lines, Schaeffer expresses the Christian artist’s unique ability to depict both the minor and major themes of life. There’s no way around it: Darkness exists in this fallen world. Even in the triumphant Christian life, the flesh still calls out to be gratified. Temptation and
stumbling still occur. As we learn to walk, Christ forming in us, bold and honest Christian art can help us navigate complexities in life in the same way bold and honest fellowship does. Christian artists are capable of depicting the minor theme through the appropriate lens of the major. We acknowledge waywardness, but we do not celebrate it. We depict fallen nature, but we don’t become gratuitous in doing so. The Christian artist can examine life truthfully, both its darkness and light. G.K. Chesterton wrote that “fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.” In this spirit, the Christian artist depicts life as it often is, because he knows the fullness of what it can be.

In addition to the edification that comes by honestly entering a shared human struggle, art and literature also offer the opportunity to imaginatively empathize with others whose struggles we do not necessarily share. C.S. Lewis wrote, “In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself… I see with a myriad of eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.” The art of bearing with another as he walks and grows—perhaps especially if he is not yet where he ought to be—is of critical importance to establishing a compassion response. Christian art does not always depict the ideal state of man. It depicts characters and scenes as they are sometimes found in this world: Broken, in progress, hungry for a redemption only the Christian knows.

We invite you to enjoy the breadth and honesty of the works within. They are bridges and images, depictions of humanity in its various states of falleness, salvation, and sanctification. The works provide opportunities for community, edification, compassion, and forbearance.
Does Jesus even do that anymore? I’ve read about it in Bible stories, but what does that mean? What did it look like? Did Jesus really say, “take up your mat and walk?” and it just worked?

All they did was ask and it worked?

What if I’m not sure if Jesus can heal me? Should I still ask? Could he still do it?

Or what if I’ve asked and it’s not working? What if I pray and pray and pray, but my knees still ache and my bones still quake and my body’s still broken?

Or what if my relationships are broken, and my friendships are crushed, and families are devastated all around me?

Or what about that hurt, that deep, deep pain inflicted upon me, wrought from the carelessness

or the maliciousness

of others
that has ruined me,
slicing me open and leaving me raw,
gasping for breath.
Can God heal that?
What if he doesn’t?
What if he won’t?
What if I still struggle with my sin, and my
soul is wracked by sickness and temptation
crowds me in?

*Though he slay me, I will still trust him.*

Where is God when I’m sinning – is he there?
Can he still heal that?

*Though he slay me, I will still trust him.*

What does it mean to be healed, and what
does it mean to be made whole?

*Though he slay me, I will still trust him.*

Where are you, God?
Where are you?
Jesus, where are you?
If you are really strong to save, why am I not
healed yet?

Find me in my asking, find me in my hurting,
for here I am, waiting to be found.

*Though he slay me, I will still trust him.*
A STUDY IN VULNERABILITY
SARAH HARRIS
PART I

POETRY
AN ARTIST’S PRAYER

BRIAN CAMPBELL

Vincent sat in the upper room
Communing with the world beyond the window’s glass
With his drinking eyes and flowers in bloom
Yellow on pale blue canvas

Elohim, may the toil of my hands
Bear witness to your marvelous name;
As Michelangelo, for a thousand
Days, painted thy atoning plan
In darkness, thy glory to proclaim

Jehovah, may the sound of my hope
Remind the earth of your faithful word;
As Messiaen, in kaleidoscopes
Of aural color, crippled the lope
Of cruel time for all souls who heard
My Abba, may the trust in my heart
Believe when I cannot understand;
As Andrei, bleeding with wounds that smart
In his soul, in a world ripped apart
By chaos, drew Christ in the wasteland

Vincent saw yellow everywhere
He saw it in shacks, in stars, in ripples of sun;
Give me your eyes, and this yellow torch to bear
These reflections of your Son
HALLELUJAH
FOR THE CROSS, HE IS EVER FAITHFUL

CAMPBELL BORTEL

If it wasn’t for the cross, the fire would be futile
If it wasn’t for the fire, the impurity would last a while
If it wasn’t for the trial, our faith would be an ash pile
If it wasn’t for the cross, the fire would be futile

But Hallelujah for the cross, God shows his power in weakness
Hallelujah for the fire, God turns our pride to meekness
Hallelujah for the trial, God draws our heart to seek His
Hallelujah for the cross, God shows his power in weakness.
Hallelujah for the cross, in the shadows the Sufferer, perfect
Hallelujah for the fire, refined to gold by heat, His project
Hallelujah for the trial, the preparation it was worth it
Hallelujah for the cross, we never could deserve it

If it wasn’t for the cross, our faith be empty, wasteful
If it wasn’t for the cross, our hurt forever painful
If it wasn’t for the cross, in trial never grateful
So Hallelujah for the cross, He is ever faithful
I got a text from my Grandma today and it read like this: “We went to church with Aunt Cheryl and Paul. Their church is talking about marriage for four weeks. Interesting! We are warm here today. Hope you are having a good day. Jenny is in California for the Honey talk she does. Love you. We hope you’re practicing skiing on one foot. We saw a girl at Walmart today around your age who had Stelletos (?) heels on and was in so much pain she could hardly walk. She and her boyfriend bought her some flip flop shoes. She was nearly in tears.”
WALKING THROUGH SNOWFALL

MEGHAN LARGENT

There’s power in silence in snow blanketing old sins like cotton tears that cover both fresh and old graves future sins and past mistakes lost souls and those who finally have been found.
Do souls bear silence?
Or are they innately pure
transcending even gravity
to freeze the body into
strict solitude
unrelenting peace?
Silence is forgiveness
rebirth
(isolation from a world so
densely meaningful
that it cannot contain me
cannot feel my sorrow
or even my roaring
emptiness —
cannot be)
captured within this
bright
empty canvas.
I think the snow knows
the material of my soul —
because when I
fall
it falls too
constant and steady
breathing with the world
in a quiet roar
yet approaching so pure
and newborn
that I can’t help but
envy its innocence
its eternal
silence.
So I stand
still
and watch
its airy gestures
and frozen smiles
as it wraps the earth in
its cold embrace —
and just for
one moment
I float
down
redeemed.
IF

CLARA COSTELLO

“if my art is a wine then my soul is a grape,  
trampled,  
squeezed out,  
crushed,  
but ornate.”
COLLAPSE

MEGHAN LARGENT

Maybe death isn’t real
until you’ve felt it
like a kick to
your gut
fingernails against
cheekbones –
when you can
feel
taste
breathe
the pain
like newly shoveled dirt
filling your nostrils
burrowing under
your fingernails
a shovel-full falling
into your lungs
with every breath
every beat of your
stuttering heart.
Maybe it’s all a lie. 
Souls don’t belong 
six feet below 
concave under the weight —
or maybe that’s the pressure 
in my chest 
threatening to collapse like 
the explosion of a 
landmine 
above mining tunnels 
lanterns and screams and 
blood-red petals 
falling. 
I never knew how those 
miners’ wives must feel 
until I too 
knew someone buried 
ever to be seen again.
A glance, out of the two-story window
Into the backyard
Where a wishful wood swing sways back and forth in the wind.
She floats down the halls,
Peeking into cavernous rooms
Brimming with emptiness.

In the kitchen, a husband’s zippered lunch box,
A note scrawled on a yellow post-it,
A weighted sigh.
An abandoned coffee cup resting idle on the counter
    A ring of brown stain muddling the bottom.

She stops,
    Gazing out the kitchen sink window,
    Straining to hear something other than
    Silence.
Perhaps the pitter-patter of feet,
The morning routine of Tom and Jerry or Curious George.
   A complaint
   A whine
   A cry
   To turn her life into a song.

She is built of a home she does not have,
She is carefully created to fill, but remains empty.
She flounders through days,
   And prays through nights,
Imagining a life
   Where her voice is a song,
   And her home is a home,
And she is a woman.
at each rushing-on of wind
they splay out like pages
from a book with old binding.
scarlet tongues lap at the air.
a petal is yanked free
and wheels away into breathless
solitude. that makes three.

i gather up each falling soldier
(uniforms veined red and edges
stained with dark rainwater and
lips chapped by time)
and i cup them together,
propping them into original form.
cool velvet kisses my fingers.
when i let go the rose unfolds, it falls
open, sagging with old age. it’s not even
days cut off. one thorn remains
and scrapes dully at my thumb,
like denial. O Lord, He said you would
fade. in your dying scent is harsh sweetness,
is sour incense. you gasp heavy.

O Lord, the wind blew right through us,
you tore us asunder. now you carry us gently.
if you do not restore us to stem,
   O Lord,
redeem us to sky.
FIGHTING FOR YOU
SARAH HARRIS
Eggs, flour, salt. The three ingredients to make the perfect manicotti shell. Manicotti was the trade mark of our Sicilian Christmas celebrations. I’m four and I know I’ll be making manicotti one day. My grandmother smiled at me while she filled the stainless-steel ladle just to the brim and slowly released its contents onto the hot griddle. She dumps the mix out and uses the smoothed bottom to evenly distribute the batter. Ten seconds then flip.

If the shells are smooth, the batter is good. If the shells are shriveled, the batter is bad.

She picks the crêpe up with her hands, having lost all sense of heat in her pointer finger and thumb. She stacks it onto the wide red dinner plate. Seventy-five smooth shells later she covers the still warm crêpes with Costco brand plastic wrap and brings them outside to rest on our glass patio table. It’s always cold enough for an outside fridge at Christmas time.

My grandmother completes this picture.

Ricotta cheese, cubed mozzarella, eggs, oregano, salt. Five ingredients to make the
best manicotti filling. We lay out sheets of wax paper to cover the counter. My grandma, my mom, and I all begin to lay out the crêpes across the wax paper. I’m twelve and I hover over the counter trying to perfectly roll each crêpe without spilling the contents. Each rolled crêpe is placed crease down into the pan coated with my Aunt’s homemade tomato sauce. Only my aunt can ladle the sauce and dish out the crêpe filling.

Manicotti shells are nothing without the filling.

We fill each pan and cover it with tin foil and usher the pans outside to my grandpa’s glass patio table. Manicotti comes once a year and only on Christmas.

My grandmother is fading from this picture.

Pale white lights, long hallways, yellow tables. The perfect ingredients to make any holiday feel like a funeral. My family sits around the woman we call grandmother. I’m seventeen and I sit helpless in a sticky armed table chair. My grandpa feeds her cranberries on a white plastic spoon. Her legs are bound with braces supporting her lifeless limbs.

Her once smooth hands are shriveled. Her mind filled with nothing.

The outside shell of a human can appear intact, but a mind remains hollow. Her black eyes stare back at us. Our words are returned with shrieks and tears, and if you’re lucky you’ll get a smile. This comes every day, not just for Christmas.

My grandmother isn’t in this picture.
Wallace Scaldwell never even took a step behind the lectern. He was one of the first weekly visiting guest lecturers at Bible college. He cantered up onto the stage, and the energy he radiated made his paunchy grey and purple argyle sweater seem like racing colors. His thick white hair, groomed and pomaded meticulously, glinted under the spotlights. He grinned, paced eagerly, and orated in the southern Baptist manner, purring and shouting and rasping—truly an evangelical thoroughbred. And he was a spitter.

I remember little from his week of lecturing on the book of James. I never could stay awake during the first class period. The cafeteria coffee was weak, and didn’t kick in until the second period. So I let my eyes close and seal when Scaldwell stalked past. I always knew when he was coming—whenever he drifted within ten feet, a wall of strong, musky cologne slapped my senses. I would snap my eyes open in time to meet the rolling whites of his eyes, which mimicked his waves of speech about Trials and the Evils of the Tongue and True Religion. Too bad I was under-caffeinated and cynical.

The highlight of that week of lectures was when
he passed me, made a particularly rousing point that required a dynamic squelch of lips and tongue, and sprayed Rachel May in the forehead with a wad of spittle. She recoiled, her pretty face contorting in quiet agony. To my enormous delight, Wallace Scaldwell did not notice at all and moved on, stamping and braying about the Idea of caring for orphans and widows.

I’m jaded. I know it. It’s not that I take an issue with Wallace Scaldwell – I take an issue with all the speakers I’ve heard who boil down the beautiful and essential truths. They all use the same formula for Baptist-style sermon soup: three or four alliterated points with loosely-tied rambling between, and funny anecdotes for flavor. After a few years of being spoon-fed truths, one develops the palette and stomach to discern the quality of a sermon. So much talk of meat and milk – and you can make some delicious stews, cream soups, and chowders with them – but often there is not even milk or meat in the preaching. And now I can taste when preachers have been relying on the same old formula for years, when they heave the hunk of Easter lamb into a pot of water and boil it down with no thought for how it should, historically, be cooked or seasoned. They replace the cup of wine with a plastic thumbful of grape juice – and the juice is mostly made of concentrated apple juice anyway.

So when Wallace Scaldwell cut up the book of James, freeze-dried the pieces, reconstituted them in weak milk heavily seasoned with Southern spice, and set the whole pot boiling, I turned up my nose. I even saw him spit it in, though I don’t think he realized, bless his heart.
When my father baptized me in Paradox Lake before I left for college, he plunged me under before “…and the Spirit,” left the pastor’s lips. I sucked cold lake water up my nose, and electric creature fear swamped my nervous system. I spasmed. But Dad crushed my arms across my chest in an ‘x’ and kept me submerged. After a few drowned seconds, he hoisted me up. My feet found purchase in shifting lake sand. I dashed the water from my eyes, dragged in a rough breath through raw lungs, and felt my wet t-shirt cling like loose skin to my arms and my stomach. I stood gasping, waterlogged and goose-fleshy in front of a congregation of strangers, knee-deep in the shallow end of the beachfront. The acidic burning in my lungs left me tasting blood in the back of my throat all day, even after the grilled hot dogs and sour cream and onion potato chips.

Internally, I agonized over whether this baptism counts.

In the middle-school youth group room, Mr. Motes sternly insisted that if we kids were serious about being Christians, we had to get
baptized. If we didn’t, we directly disobeyed God. Flickering fluorescent light panels on the ceiling backlit Mr. Motes, making a synthetic, starchy halo around his body.

“You’ll know when you should get baptized,” Mr. Motes continued, “You’ll feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit on your conscience.”

A pulse of anxious energy radiated from my heart, shot through the ganglia of nerves in my chest and stomach, circulated every time Mr. Motes scanned the group. I agonized and avoided eye contact. Was this anxiety a prompting of the Spirit, or the fear of baptism, of the piercing eyes of the congregation, judging my purity of spirit? Fears mingled and flowed together: fear of man, fear of God, fear of man as God, fear of the God-man, and finally, at the end of night, I was left with only clammy palms and drained adrenal glands.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again,” said Jesus, “he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus responded, perhaps exasperated, “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Probably he wrung his hands at Jesus, who probably smiled.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” I’m sure that Jesus’s eyes twinkled with mirth, knowing his fluid answer would both frustrate and soothe.

I think back on my baptism. Paradox Lake is a scoop in the Earth plowed by a glacier, fed by the Adirondack watershed and the Schroon River: a womb tucked away in the mountains, sustaining and recreating life. My Paradox birth was both an emergence from and into bodily
and psychological agony: I choked on lake water and the congregation’s expectations of me. But I believe the Spirit seeped in sometime after that. Now, when I feel a surge of cortisol, my spirit better senses the difference between human anxiety and divine conviction.

See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
Did ever such Love and Sorrow meet?
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?
“I worry about the birds,” I tell my friend. “Like, where do they go in the winter? How do they stay warm?”

“That’s your burden to bear,” she laughs.

I’m thinking of the small birds, the ones who don’t migrate, who are smaller than my hand and can’t escape the snow. Wrens, swallows, chickadees. My internet searches tell me that on cold winter nights, they huddle together or try to find a hiding place. The underside of a bridge. A tree trunk cavity. The depths of an evergreen. An old shoe.

This list sounds something like natural poetry to me, but to the birds it’s just the harsh reality of survival. The cold weather came early this year—the community in my part of Ohio experienced about a week of autumn—and I wonder if the birds were blindsided. Did they search for new homes as if it were business as usual, or did they panic at the lack of warm real estate? Do birds sense their body temperature dropping and understand that they may die?

I haven’t seen them for weeks, and today I feel like one of them, because no one has seen me either. My friends, on the wing as usual, don’t
know that today I’m paralyzed by cold. My disease, so capricious in its schedule, confined me to the nest today. Maybe this, too, sounds poetic; it is not. My internet searches tell me: Sick birds will go to ground and, because they feel vulnerable, they will hide away. I am not hiding. Anyone can find me. I am only grounded because I cannot move.

My grandpa once told me he finds sparrows interesting because they are directly mentioned in the Bible. Jesus did say: “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will...Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” This brings me little comfort. God admits that He still lets sparrows fall to the ground.

Little comfort for the sparrow that someone watches him die.

The church of God is often called “the flock” because of the way the Bible describes us as sheep with a loving Shepherd. Birds, who also travel in flocks, do not have a shepherd, but at least they may choose to share body heat by nesting together. Communities help each other survive. But I have found that almost no one in my “flock” knows how to deal with suffering unless it is contained within the environment of a hospital room. If that situation is reached, everyone is confident in what to do. If you are suffering in a natural setting—if winter comes for you in the middle of everyone else’s summer—no one knows how to warm you. And if they’re flying, you don’t want to bring them down. Sick birds hide away...

Too much metaphor, too much poetry. The reality is a young adult in her bed, dipping in and out of consciousness, physically unable to move. My roommate leaves because she can’t help me. My friends don’t know anything, so they don’t contact me. I shiver under my blankets and, in my brief flickers of wakefulness, wish someone would pull me upright and give me water and play me music. I want to be yanked out of the nest and carried, prone, through the air until my wings start twitching. The trees are so bare.

That’s your burden to bear.

I have seen robins in the middle of winter. They all flocked in a specific tree that I passed each
morning; there must have been ten or twenty in those naked branches every day. I called it “the robin tree,” or “the tree of robins,” and I looked forward to it because it was inexplicable. Now my research tells me: robins do not sing until spring, but they are social in the winter. Flocking means better protection, easier berry-finding, more body heat. But even alone, they can survive below freezing. Their feathers insulate them. “Hope is the thing with feathers,” Dickinson said, because the birds with the best layers of feathers can heat themselves in a snowstorm, even though they sure as hell aren’t singing.

I remember once when I picked up a baby bird who had fallen out of a tree. I don’t remember if he was dusty brown or slate gray; what I do remember is he was small and soft and almost weightless, made of hollow bones. I cupped him in my palms and showed him to an adult, and they told me that by picking him up, I had killed him. His mother would reject him because of my scent. I placed him back on the ground and held back tears.

I also take pictures of dead birds whenever I see them, flattened against the pavement, legs crooked, wings already rotting. I’m not sure why I do this. Something about them on the ground seems so wrong, so helpless, and so sacred. Something about the ugliness also feels beautiful. I suppose I feel that documenting each corpse is my own way of briefly cradling it in my hand.

I see that I may be too sentimental about birds. (Is sentimentality, though, just another word here to describe affection for what is closely observed?) Regardless, I realize as I consider these things that if God told the truth to His disciples about the sparrows, He feels more affection for these little ones than I do. In which case I wonder if he is the one who directs them to old shoes and evergreens. Or whether he feels a shade of sorrow when it is his “will” to let them fall.

No one has ever told me, “It is God’s will that you have your disease.” No one has ever tried to explain anything to me except for me: I have written and revised God’s divine intentions a hundred times. Erased them all. Asked questions, begged answers, thrown accusations... Don’t tell me that Christians believe in God to make themselves feel better. I would likely feel much better at times if I believed in pure
survival, just me against the world, with no God watching. Sick birds pitted against nature, with no God calling them to rest in Him, calling them to come out of hiding.

I don’t know how to understand what God says about sparrows. I don’t know how to cup hope in my palms without killing it. I still feel helpless when the winds hit me, each time seemingly so out of season, each hiding place so lonely. Sometimes I feel like there’s no way to wade through the deep, deep exhaustion without my strength failing completely.

But I believe, I believe, I believe it can happen. When I give in and stop beating my wings and tell God (resentfully) that He can hold me, I really do feel inexplicable peace. I do find rest. It’s just the choosing of this that requires strength: the strength to accept being grounded.

Don’t try to tell me that all this is too sentimental, too poetic, too unrealistic. I am the one bewildered at inexplicable faith. I am the one surprised by morning song.

I’ve seen the tree of robins.
Grandma sits at our dining room table, her expression as worn as the deck of cards she holds in her hand. By now, the winds have stopped howling and the floodwaters have subsided, but the electricity has been out for two days. Our house is the only house in the neighborhood with running water, and my Grandma’s house might be flooded.

When she places the cards down, the Kings, Queens, and Jacks stare up at me with blank eyes. They look different to me: I’ve seen anxious looks in my parent’s eyes ever since the forecasters announced Irma had suddenly veered west directly through Florida. The cards are battered like the house across the street that lost its back porch to a tornado passing by. I sit down next to Grandma, watching her conduct a military strategy to take her mind off the battle we’ve all been fighting for the past week.

Eager to show me how order is established, Grandma resets the cards in their columns, totaling twenty-eight cards, seven revealing themselves to the ceiling. Black meets red in opposing patterns. The kingdoms are scattered, each card succumbing to the rules of the match, but for once, there seems to be order.
I follow Grandma’s directions, developing a strategy. I keep the game going until the black Queens I betrothed to red Kings for my benefit are taken back to their kingdoms. She watches me put the cards in their proper piles and create absolute organization amid the chaos of outside. Grandma stares out the window at the bare wreckage with eyes like the paper eyes of the Kings, fixed on nothing.
The volunteers hung cranberry suet they bought at the pet store in the strip mall, overpriced. There it had been, swinging gratuitously by a pink ribbon from a hickory limb behind the nets. Kristen knew sunflower seeds were better than suet. Furthermore, the Clark River Bird Observatory did not bait birds with feed as to catch ones that wouldn’t have flown into the net willfully. The volunteers knew this. They ignored this. Kristen worked by herself most mornings, but all the volunteers were out so early with her now because it was the third week in July, a banding week. Kristen had pulled nylon out of feather barbs and fastened tracking tags around limbs for hours. The moon had seemed like a projection in a lecture, grainy and translucent, as if Kristen could see the sky through the craters.

That moon vision was a scientific impossibility, but for a moment, she did smell the sparrow flapping between her fingers—sweet straw then warm bacteria like kimchi. Kristen clipped seven moon-patterned and strawberry-patterned drawstring bags quivering with songbirds to her lanyard. Breeze and light carrying honeysuckle and the ponds and the algae was pushing through the hickories that bordered
the wall of nets, cutting out shadows of chickadees, finches, warblers and sparrows from the bags. The nets looked like long barbwire fence from certain angles, or invisible straight on, or inhaling the wet breeze from where Kristen was. Her chest felt sharp, not because of the light or quivering bags or the breeze, which was already hot, but because she thought about how she loved birds. It was good to have a passion. Avian Research was publishing her study about tick-borne pathogens in Eastern songbirds. The journal emailed her yesterday afternoon; they would put it in the Fall issue, cover story. She missed spending whole days on this kind of research in the lab. It had been a controlled environment for her focused work, the bright overhead lights, the slick tile, the commercial freezer cooling her face when she retrieved specimens. Now, bags of birds twitched like haunted tassels around Kristen’s waist as she walked back to the banding stations.

They dealt with the birds in the large white tent with a scalloped top edged with dirt, one side open when there wasn’t rain. This was pitiful compared to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which had more birds, more technology, and more nets than here. Kristen had majored in biology at Cornell after she scored a 35 on the ACT. She stayed to earn two master’s degrees in bird population studies and evolutionary biology because she loved birds. And she had survived by keeping schedules, consuming raisins and seven ounces of tomato juice every day before 7 am for all those eight years. Kristen moved back to Kentucky to write her thesis because apartments cost less than the open position at the Clark River Wildlife Refuge paid. A job with the Interior would diversify her doctoral application at least.

The volunteers were measuring birds at the folding tables with their oatmeal in thermoses and now the sun that turned them to shadows in canvas like the birds in the bags. They chattered to each other and to the birds—“you’re a fat one, ready to migrate, Benton County passed stricter zoning laws, isn’t he fat”—and ate cinnamon oatmeal with plastic spoons between measurements. They made jokes when they blew the breast feathers out of the way to guess the yellow fat and when they stuck the birds head first into the weighing tubes.

Ten or twelve volunteers usually came. They were retired and came with their spouses or
were otherwise divorced and retired. Kristen realized birding merely supplemented bridge and Amish novels for them. At the beginning of the summer, she taught them everything they were now qualified to do there: how to set up the nets, hold birds, safely remove the birds from the nets, band them, and determine their species, wingspan, weight, sex, age, and fat. Some volunteers didn’t have a college degree in anything much less this field, and Kristen knew a degree didn’t necessarily matter. But they honestly knew very little about birds, and they made this evident.

Terry closed his eyes. He blew out a puff of cinnamon air and slowly raised his arms straight out with a cardinal in his fist and asked had they ever noticed how the crow sings the earliest in the morning all year round and never gets any credit for it.

“Smartest bird of any,” Ann said.

“The whip-poor-will wakes me up at six,” Barb said.

“Only in the summer though.”

“The rest have too comfortable of down pillows on them to wake up.”

“That’s it, that’s it.”

Kristen had never caught a crow, all these years banding; a crow’s call had never felt close to her, had always come from the tall white desolate trees in back of her parents’ house. Bird songs were never as near or as real as Kristen’s holding the birds themselves. But in the net or in someone’s hand, they usually panicked a little and squawked generically. Songs weren’t in her particular sphere of interest.

Terry flipped through his Guide to Birds of North America for the crows, but the 1966 edition. He’d written little poems beside some birds, rhyming “beak” with “seek.” The pages detailing the small raptors were loose and the corners cracking onto the tarp, and a spread covered in Ospreys slipped onto the table—an Osprey hunting, an Osprey in a nest, an Osprey dropping a reptile into its chick’s mouth.

“The older guides get some things a little wrong about the birds,” Kristen noted.
“I can’t recognize the birds by any other images than these ones,” Terry smiled kind of impishly.

“Well they do photographs now.”

“The photographs don’t capture the personality of the birds. Try telling me the angles aren’t all technical now,” he laughed, but the high pitch in his voice told Kristen he wasn’t kidding about it.

Some days after shifts the volunteers drifted through the grasslands and whistled bird calls. And even after Kristen told them the exact typical weight range of a species, they sometimes quietly Googled appropriate weights on their iPads, the extra big font reflecting in their glasses. On occasion, they brought back bats from the nets, and once, a very large beige moth.

George had walked into the tent that day, eyebrows raised, pinching his bag by one corner. Kristen had asked, “Did you catch a hummingbird?”

And George said, “no, better.” He gently shook out dusty particles, a severed moth wing, and the naked body of an insect. De-winged, the moth did look almost like an owl with its horns and its black eyes gawking inside the soft face.

Kristen had said “this isn’t a bird,” and of course George was aware. She was tired of reproaching mildly, but anything harsher would confuse the volunteers and stall her work and go against her nature.

“I’m letting the victims back to their nests,” Ann interrupted their focus again. Ann, Terry, and Barb announced every time they finished a bird and would step outside the tent to release it. Sometimes they counted down, releasing them simultaneously, pitching the birds to the sky, laughing and pointing. This annoyed Kristen. Birds weren’t fidget spinners. The whole thing was tacky and disrespectful to the birds and her mission here. Eight species living in the reserve were endangered. Cats were getting the others. An overpopulation of cats dashed around Benton, KY unnecessarily, yet the volunteers fed them sardines in the meadow.

Kristen could smile at the volunteers now though, feeling charitable again, remembering her publication and only one month left here. “Those finches are huge!” she said too loudly, meaning to seem impressed. She liked
to admire their cute, hopeless infatuation with colors and songs. On the other hand, Kristen thought it was sad, really, and careless; she couldn’t deny that it was sad. They couldn’t escape their self-delusion, and it was unclear whether this rendered them culpable. She guessed retirement let people abandon intentional activity. Kristen’s mom always said Grandfather joined the Moose Lodge and stopped giving tithes and offerings the weekend he received his third pension check.

Grandfather had kept a Parakeet in the basement, Kristen remembered. Also, a number of goldfish. He let the Parakeet out the window by the time Kristen was eleven, but she had respected it more than Grandfather did. She fed fruit snacks to it through the cage. She only collected the feathers that fell through the cage and never taught it to talk because she was afraid of Grandfather. And because it was a quiet bird. On the stool by the water softener she would sit for half hours at a time and watch it hop around in its water bowl. In second grade, she taped one of its unnaturally blue feathers to a page of her wish journal next to an essay titled “My Grandfather’s Pet.” Kristen displayed this at her high school graduation party under a banner that said “Ornithologist Since Age Seven” beside her National Merit plaque. She liked the idea that her maturing intellect had informed a consistent passion, and it had.

She hadn’t actually decided on her major until a meeting a month before graduation with Mr. Peters, her guidance counselor, a tall man with wispy gray-gold eyelashes who talked about careers like they were self-propelled vacuum cleaners. He pulled a spreadsheet of careers from his desk and ran his leather thumb down to Science and Mathematics.

“One of my buddies from Kentucky U did ornithology. Great guy, he really loved it. You could really go into anything with your test scores, which, phenomenal scores by the way, congratulations. There aren’t very many people who do birds for a career. You could be the next James Audubon, or I guess Jamie Audubon. We don’t have enough girls in STEM.”

When he said that, Kristen thought of the feather, how much she had always loved birds. She considered herself blessed to be confident and to have firmly identified a calling so quickly while other gifted students thrashed around,
having excelled indistinctly in every discipline.

Also, it humbled her ahead of time to know she would use her gifts and abilities preserving wildlife for her society. She had always excelled.

Two hikers were passing by the tent, pale-ribbed men in cargo shorts. They must have come upon the observatory accidently. “Bird shit everywhere,” one said to the other. Their skin jerked over their ribs like tissue paper when they laughed. They hadn’t said it so that Kristen would hear, and if they had, they would have expected her just to smirk at them. But their flippancy made Kristen indignant, for the birds. Fecal samples that the bird observatory collected offered indispensable data about avian disease, habitat, and habits. The armpits of her Interior shirt felt wet and itchy now, as if she were ashamed, as if she could really believe she were a mere custodian over fields and test tubes of bird shit. The men were watching her, and what else could she have done?

“This robin’s wingspan is 15.6 inches, which is pretty long for a robin,” she said, then a toothless smile, then stretching out the long wing. For a while afterward, she’d replay this impulsively, hissing stupid stupid stupid in her head to block it out. Then it embarrassed her too that she’d care so much and need to berate herself like that.

Kristen made the volunteers survey the forest on the last shift, not that they didn’t want to. It was 11:45 am. Birds mostly laid in the trees at noon in summer, Kristen knew. But the men had agitated her, and she wanted to research alone. She told the volunteers to look for injured birds, check the ponds, stop by the net to collect stragglers, leave the measured birds on the tables in the bags, she would let them go. They shuffled into their unexplored shade like a flock of adolescent geese, a single chattering line.

The volunteers wouldn’t have liked seeing her take feather samples from the birds anyway. They wouldn’t have understood, but the method met protocol in every way. She might explain, if they came back and saw, “it’s like plucking eyebrows,” although the volunteers were in the stage of either drawing theirs in round and red or taking secret pride in prevailing wisps. The brown thrasher Kristen was holding pierced its bill into her wrist, and before she
could dab it with a tissue, her blood dripped into the thrasher’s cloudy down. She hardly ever made these mistakes. Kristen rubbed alcohol on her wrist gash. It entered her mind that she might have looked like a poacher had the volunteers been there, blood soaking into the skin she’d plucked from. She scrubbed the bird’s stomach with alcohol too until it was a mere discoloration.

As Kristen threw the thrasher to the sky, Ann emerged from the woods too soon, her arms pumping out of sync with her pigeon-toed steps. She had the openings of two bags bunched up in one hand, another opening tucked into her button-down. Her dreamcatcher earrings wobbled hysterically, and she started speaking farther away from the tent than she had probably intended.

“The chickadees have crud all around the eyes!” Ann wailed.

“Like crusty stuff?” Kristen said and then thought that sounded stupid. But then, she thought it was nice that she knew how to speak their language. It was probably conjunctivitis, which the birds probably caught at the suet the volunteers bought at the pet store. Kristen appeared as sad as she would have been, but she had never witnessed an active bacterial disease on the field.

“Yeah it’s all crusty, and the eyes,” Ann’s own brown eyes seemed magnified, “its eyes look bloody with the stuff all in it, like some only have half an eye.” She rummaged around in one bag, pulling out a black-capped chickadee with a bad bander’s grip.

The crusty eye reminded Kristen of a medical drama she watched some in high school. In one episode, the female forensic scientist told the intern that he’d never get a promotion if he didn’t even care to clean the sleep out of his eyes in the morning. That had stuck with Kristen. It made sense that scientists should stay tidy as they approached the wild.

“Oh,” Ann sobbed almost, terrified again at the half-eyes. She squeezed her own eyes shut and cupped the chickadee in her hands and held it close to her cheek for a second. Ann always reacted excessively.
More volunteers returned with diseased chickadees until they had fourteen or fifteen. At the table stations under the tent they were popping latex gloves over their hands and squirting water mixed with Morton’s salt into all the red eyes. They worked solemnly and hoped the birds would live. “His eye is opening, look,” they’d say and slip a band around the survivor’s leg. The oatmeal thermoses were clustered together outside the tent absorbing thick heat, a shrine to the perhaps-dying.

Kristen also worked on the birds. She had never heard of an outbreak so sudden, and no one at Cornell had seen these red eyes on chickadees—only goldfinches, house finches, and not many purple finches. A team at the lab tracked avian disease exclusively, and they had never seen this. Cornell would award her a grant to head up new research on conjunctivitis in species other than finches if she wrote a report. She’d collect a sample of the likely-infected suet and swab a bit of discharge from the eyes. No birds had died yet—she was pleased—but the lab would also expect a post-mortem sample.

At Cornell, aviation stations across the Eastern U.S. shipped specimens overnight, dry ice still steaming out of the boxes in the headlights of the FedEx truck. The students would say “the parts are here,” snidely. Then they would unwrap a cold bird or feet or feathers or plasma or kidneys or heads, pull the Kleenex out of the beak and run the precise tests. Kristen would pin the robin to the corkboard and examine. In the next-door room there’d be jars of birds preserved in solvent lining the shelves, the alcohol illuminating the colors of their wings, their heads tilted coyly toward the room at the bottoms of the jars.

Deceased specimens taught them how to sustain living birds. At least one would die out here. Conjunctivitis always left birds blind and starved.

George brought back a chickadee folded up in fern leaves. Its eyes were sealed and the life of them drained and dried on its white cheek plumage. Its cheeks were much thinner than the standard weight range would have accommodated. He said he found him mixed in with pine cones at the base of a tree, had thought he was a pine cone because he didn’t move.
Kristen told him its wings were just shaking in the breeze, it was dead.

“I thought he was,” George said and condensed his lips into a crease, gazing down just past the bird in the leaves. In his other hand were three rocks he thought might have been geodes. He clinked them together, angled them in the light, checking vaguely for iridescent specks like he’d done so many times before.

“Will we band him?” George asked.

“It’s female.” Kristen said, flipping the bird upside down. The feathers had fallen off the chickadee’s stomach for the purpose of insulating some nest, some pile of rust-speckled eggs up in a tree somewhere—chances were, falling out of that tree, or too cold now.

“Then will we band her?” George corrected himself. “No.” Kristen said.

“Why?”

“It’s dead and we have it.” Kristen shook her head a little sadly, but death was vital to a productive and thriving ecosystem. Decomposers ate flesh, birds ate decomposers. This chickadee could provide useful data for the species. It was not quite dead, but, it was true, only the breeze was shaking its feathers. “It’s dead, why would we?”

“I just thought to kind of mark it special. Don’t we do that?”

Kristen loved birds. She did. She had loved them. She loved oily wings and beaks and hot, dense, pulsing torsos in her palms. And limbs. How many perfect limbs had she touched. She loved, in some sense of that word, the people who came there with cheap binoculars and Audubon phone apps and pavilion lunches. They were sweet; their self-perception was that they tried and cared. And when Kristen tore the hooked beaks of chimney swifts out of the nets and caught birds banded years ago in Ontario and generated pin drops for them on the migration map, when she measured the RNA of ten birds in one sitting, something reactive and full burst inside her stomach until her skull ached.

Kristen lifted the chickadee from the leaves and fastened its neck between her middle and pointer fingers in a proper bander’s grip. She faced outside the tent toward the forest, ponds, and nets where the birds were. It was really
nearly dead. Pressure, then a little more pressure. Then, the soft neck cracked—it cracked so gently, the bird did not feel it. The volunteers did not hear it, Kristen barely did. It had been sleeping, its eyes completely shut. The vulnerable stomach, the brood patch, shivered twice but not again. And she tucked it in a canvas bag patterned with strawberries.
COSTA RICAN HUMMINGBIRD
CAMPBELL BORTEL
STRONG, FIRM AND STEADFAST
JOY PRICHARD
INSUFFICIENT PARTITION
FORD McELROY
PART III

ARTIST SPOTLIGHTS
Tell us about yourself. How did you learn about Cedarville?

I learned about Cedarville because my parents were married students and came here. My older sister came here, and I got to know about Cedarville through her program and visiting her. Raised in Massachusetts, and I'm a Studio Art major.

Who has had the biggest influence on you as an artist?

I think I would start with family first and say, my mom. I was not really interested in art for a long time as a career. Mom and I did crafty things, building stuff for gardens or decorating for events. So, I think practically my mom is a really big part of that because she was always the one who was doing those things and teaching me how to do them.

How do your gifts of poetry and visual art inspire one another?

Both are really interesting in that I didn't know that I was geared that way for a long time. With writing specifically, I didn't even realize how much I loved writing until I got to college and
realized that everyone hated speech class and I loved it, everyone hated composition and I thought it was great, and Western Lit was really exciting for me. Then I had the opportunity to take a creative writing class, and I absolutely loved it and didn’t realize how comfortable I would get in that. There are some things that I try to communicate in one that it’s just better. Sometimes I try to make something visually, but it’s way easier for me to just write it out. I think they influence each other in that I will write something to try and process what to do visually. So in order to brainstorm for something visually creative, I’ll write it out. They aren’t super separated for me. You’re always describing visual pieces with words, and then you’re using words to create a picture.

**Do you have a preferred medium?**

I would say within the last few years I realized how much I love working in 3-D, so it’s not any one particular medium. Everyone always asks, “What’s your particular medium?” I’ll say, “Something that stands off the table.” I really am comfortable using my hands. I think I figured that out even in my working in the theater. I work with Tim Phipps building sets, and I started working on that even before I declared my major in art. That was something that went from, “Oh, that just sounds like a lot of fun,” to, “Oh, I actually love doing this,” and just getting that experience. So, my favorite would be anything I can physically touch and things that are pliable. I love creating organic forms, making things that look natural, that will look like they’re in motion.

**How has your love of the arts impacted your effectiveness as a leader on campus?**

I think there are different lessons that you learn in making art. So maybe not specifically, “I like clay. Now I’m a leader.” When you’re making art something that I’ve seen is, you can’t isolate yourself and always have your guard up. Be willing to be open and show people what you’re thinking visually or through words. That’s something that directly correlates to leadership. On my committee, how do I show them what I’m thinking? How do I convey that in a way that they can understand? And how am I also able to be vulnerable in sharing? I love seeing how art can relate to community, and seeing how I can create interactive pieces that encourage people to think and have a conversation. A lot of
my pieces come out of conversations that I have with people. So I'll talk to someone at Coffee and Community, and that could be something that influences an art piece that I am working on. I've seen that conversations I'm having are always fueling what I'm making. A lot of what I do on SGA is about learning how to connect people together who wouldn't normally be interacting. How do you show different points of view? That's something that I really love about Coffee and Community. It's all about sharing each other's opinion. A lot of what I do in art is conveying my view to you and figuring out, "How do we work through the fact that we see things differently and still try and find common ground?"

**Family and personal stories seem to play heavily in your artwork; why and how do you incorporate those aspects of your life?**

I think there's an aspect of just being honest and showing what your experiences are. Literally everyone says that, but then when you figure that out yourself, it's like, "Oh wow, this is incredible." What I am personally going through and the people that I'm personally interacting with is a huge part of who I am and what I think about on a daily basis. Who I talk to when I'm processing those ideas, are a huge part of who I am. With my portrait paintings, in particular, I loved being able to finally realize that art becomes so much better when you're enjoying it. And these are literally the people that I enjoy the most. So why wouldn't I make that the topic? Because that's something that is so close to me. That's been part of my life forever and the people that I open up the most to. I think just getting comfortable with saying, "My ordinary is worth exploring, and it's worth trying to articulate." My poem about hair is about as ordinary as it gets. So I think finding things that are ordinary to me is really interesting to flesh out because I can see how it relates to other people and how different it is from other people's ordinary. I have different conceptual pieces as well that are not just related to family but really specific topics and issues. It can be tempting to gravitate towards those to say, "Look, I care about something super deep and super weighty and thoughtful." I'm trying to not reach for something lofty just for the sake of being lofty. That's something that my poetry classes have taught just as much as my art classes. Instead of trying to do something that's super grand and really impressive and for the sake of looking brilliant, let's just grapple
with ordinary and dive into something that you are familiar with. Because I am not familiar with anything lofty, so it comes across as being fake. If you're trying to be real, then going after fake things isn't going to end up being impressive.
I bow, asking for daily bread,
Eyeing the clock’s moving hands, sure tomorrow’s bread is going stale already.
Clenching the invisible, the unreal, the unpromised,
My knuckles turn white, muscling the imaginary, willing it to be true.
I’m fairly certain it could/might/probably/ought to be here. Now.
“Today” is when I want to embrace what I want. But I know,
I’ll always have what I need...what I need...what I need...
Carrying rock-solid provisions, my fingers grasp
After wispy possibilities.
Drawing outlines in my mind, I make room for it
At my desk, or in my bank, or on my left hand.
The thoughts that leave rubber tracks in my mind keep circling.
Only long stares at today’s bread halt restlessness.
Holy distractions lovingly placed,
Beautiful detours to today,
To the bread on my table.
My fingers tear the golden crust,
And steam escapes towards my face.
I bite into my piece, dripping with oil,
And taste the truth that
I have what I need.
What I
Need.
SNAGGED

Something snagged my hair
A stranger’s hand releases a curl.
Smiling eyes study and stare,
Fascinated fingers ruffle and twirl.

A stranger’s hand releases a curl,
I usually smile and ask for their name.
Fascinated fingers ruffle and twirl,
They complain their hair is too tame.

I usually smile and ask for their name.
“It’s easy to find you in a crowd.”
They complain their hair is too tame,
“Natural hair? You must be proud.”

“It’s easy to find you in a crowd.”
“Does it do that by itself?”
“Natural hair? You must be proud.”
“I wish I could have some of your hair myself.”
“Does it do that by itself?”
Poodles have my sympathy.
“I wish I could have some of your hair myself.”
Some compliments come timidly.

Poodles have my sympathy.
“Is it okay to say I like your hair?”
Some compliments come timidly,
Sometimes with a side-long stare.

“Is it okay to say I like your hair?”
A conversation starts turning,
Sometimes with a side-long stare,
Just because someone snagged my hair.
OUR GARDEN

I cover my mouth, my hand
Prevents sharp words from shooting out.
Afraid of scars unplanned.

Why jab, ruffle or upend?
Surrounded by silence, that safe, covering clout.
I cover my mouth, my hand

Picks a white daisy where we’ve gardened.
Why expose weeds that sprout?
Afraid of scars unplanned.

A hedge between me and my friend,
My words are clouds, throwing shadows of doubt.
I cover my mouth, my hand
Halts honesty, our garden’s drought won’t end.
But thundering words have flooded, doused,
Afraid of scars unplanned.

I don’t want grass-stains as my friendship demands
In stifling silence I’m urged to shout!
I cover my mouth, my hand
Shows fear of scars unplanned.
MAIDA SPRINGER KEMP
ODE TO SHARPIES

You sit behind my right ear while I think.
You faithfully collect my thoughts
in black and white bubbles.
I hear your nib squeak out instructions in bullet points,
bold lines shout importance.
You give a page highlighted adventures,
with my orange dragon eating purple fish.
You climb vertical mountains to dot my i’s,
and belay into valleys of calligraphy.
Thank you for adding flowers to notes for my roommate.
For being the legal graffiti at summer camp.
I always enjoy our experiments with temporary tattoos,
When your tip drags across my ankle.
More patient than a pen, you’re determined, visual glue.
You mark cardboard boxes and mirrors, the corner of my couch,
and my previously favorite shirt. I’ll forgive you for that.
You follow my rocky paths of creativity, and lead
color-coded expeditions.
We would’ve been friends forever.
But once I laid you on a desk instead of behind my ear.
Exposed, someone else snatched you up,
a thief of dragons and flowers and tattoos.
Now you’re writing in another hand,
I hope my fingers won’t be empty forever.
ROLLING HILLS

ARTIST SPOTLIGHTS: MIRANDA DYSON | 69
Tell me about yourself.

I come from a family that is very close. They are definitely my best friends. They did an awesome job raising us to be best friends, and I’ve also known Biblical truth my whole life and was raised in a family that believes with a lot of personal sincerity. There’s not much room for artificiality in my family (laughs). So God has, for reasons that I still don’t know, God has definitely preserved me and blessed me richly in that way, that sincere faith in Him has been a very strong reality for my family and for myself, and I’m so thankful for that. I do come from an artistic family. If they are not artistic of themselves, they support and have a passion for the arts. The biggest example is the fact that I have a sister...My sister, who is my person, she’s my favorite human on this planet...she is the other artist on this planet who I have done the most growth through and with. She is an actress, so theater is her field. And she is one of the most wonder-filled and kind-hearted people I know, so so much of my wonder for the world around me and for the humans around me was nurtured by her, and she definitely taught me that art is the study of humanity and that the strongest art is about the story of humans and
human relationships. So, she’s really important in my life.

I’ve also always known that I love art and that I want to be a visual artist. I don’t even remember a light-bulb moment of discovering that that’s what I wanted to be, because it’s always been that way. And my parents are so incredibly supportive of children with impractical dreams... I realized how rare that was. I have been so, so fortunate my parents are very impractically supportive (we both laugh).

How do you feel that the impractical dreaming feeds into your faith and the practice of your art?

I think the object of my faith enables me to be impractical and not to worry about it. It’s totally up to God to provide for me if He has directed me in such a clear and strong way, and if I’m obeying him, then He will provide for me one way or another. I think that trusting that a Being who is so much bigger is in control, that enables me to be impractical.

What are the themes in your work that you feel have evolved or that you have pursued?

My work is deeply faith-saturated. And I’m also one of those; I’m a believer and an artist who does not buy into the idea that cliche Christian messages are sometimes held onto too tightly and so often demean the quality of artwork. So I’m definitely one of those people that does not think that art always has to be evangelistic. I am happy when I see believers who feel free to make art that isn’t necessarily or directly or blatantly about Jesus and their faith. But for me, it just naturally comes. My art is where I ask my questions. And I have a lot of really deep spiritual questions, and confusions and frustrations and art is totally where I express that confusion and frustration, and it’s also where I get to communicate really creatively what I have discovered in my searching and in my struggling, and it’s also a way to compel my viewers to ask and seek and struggle for themselves.

And especially in this past year, I’ve realized that my themes manifest from two questions that tend to surface: How does the finite interact with the infinite? How on earth does that work? Because that is what we are designed for, it’s why we exist, and it’s exactly what we’re incapable of properly doing. And so much of it is due to our broken capacity to understand, and so
as someone who craves understanding - I really do, I crave understanding - and realizes that I exist to know the infinite Maker better, like that, is why I am breathing, and as someone who is constantly running into my insufficiencies to do so. Oh, and the other question is: What are the effects of a human’s broken capacity to understand on the mind and on society? The more I grow in my understanding of art and sociology, the more I am so intrigued by realizing why people do what they do. A lot of my artwork is also observing those effects. They are not directly or primarily as spiritual as my other pieces, but they’re totally linking back to the spiritual crisis of the human.

How do these two questions influence your choice of materials and explain your pieces?

I use reclaimed material and found objects, and it makes me feel good to clean up clutter. I think I am a very green person. It feels better to use that type of stuff. I’m saving space. I’m not wasting material by buying new stuff. I’m using what’s already been given to me. It kinda feels really good to recycle, and that’s a sociological issue, which is more secondary and subconscious. And also I’ve discovered that the topics of my art - it’s hard to manifest them in an image. They’re more like diagrams of thought, very metaphorical. And so they’re not very realistic or naturalistic. I’m creating this abstract metaphor of my thought process. And so as far as a painting or drawing, that can be hard to accomplish. Whereas, if I’m using a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional sculpture, that opens up possibilities, because it doesn’t have to be realistic or depictive. If I’m making a piece about how humans are so good at making disconnects, why don’t I use something that references a human brain and then actually collect literal cords and outlets?

So, you lean towards sculpture so that the viewer can engage to a greater degree?

Yeah, the possibilities are more open, and the outcome is much more unpredictable.

Do you feel like you have to surrender to some of the concepts? Are there times when you struggle to share a concept because you have to be vulnerable? Is there a certain amount of intimacy you feel you have to share with the viewer?
Yeah, I definitely feel there’s vulnerability, and even intimacy, but it goes back to the kind of family I was raised in. I’m not really scared of those things. In fact, when my family was rocked by a big secret coming out, vulnerability became all the more ferociously precious to me. So I prize that opportunity to be vulnerable because I’ve seen what the lack of vulnerability can do.

What does the lack of vulnerability do?

It’s super deceptive. I feel like I met a completely different person the day that secret came out. And the lack of vulnerability and how it has affected my life and family has not caused me to struggle to trust people. It’s helped me know that there is only so much I can know about the truth of a human. Whereas some people might criticize my lack of being able to doubt or hold some type of skepticism for people, I’ve learned that quality is needed. And also, God, by His grace, has had to do a lot of shaping and convicting of me to still give grace and to love people.

Where do you see this in the context of your pieces?

In "They Were Carried Along by the Spirit," that piece is me expressing confusion, and admitting how I don’t’ really understand how the holy text of Scripture has been given to us. It’s concrete to represent the unconditional truth of God, but it is broken and held together by unfired earthen-ware stitches to represent how God has still used humans to compile it, and that that’s a very imperfect means. So that’s me admitting I don’t really understand it, even though Cedarville has a very clear stance on it. It’s a big topic. And I think that piece includes some vulnerability because I know of a lot of people that have expressed skepticism and doubt about matters like that. They have hesitated to express those because of the culture. I know a lot of doubters and skeptics who have really valid questions and really valid doubts who have not shared them out of fear. Through this piece and through displaying here, I want to create an approach of vulnerability and say, “We can dialogue about our confusions and lingering questions about things that are significant. We shouldn’t be afraid to wrestle well with those issues.”
Is the wrestling a step of faith?

Yeah, I think it is. I think wrestling well is a step of faith - what I mean by that is it’s a step of courage because it can be scary to admit that you doubt something that a lot of people would not be wild about you doubting. I think it is a step of faith because it is an opportunity that we have access to because of our relationship with the Father. We can approach His throne, and by His grace, through our faith, we can dialogue with Him, and seek further understanding of Him. So I think question-asking is a crucial step of faith. And never to put us in the right and Him in the wrong, but just to admit that we don’t get it and we need help from Him to get it.

How does your experience with theater and other types of art influence your art?

The theater has ignited my passion for collaborative projects because that’s what theater is at its core: a team of people coming together. I covet that. A lot of visual art can be self-led, self-focused, and it’s doesn’t have to be, but it just naturally tends towards that. But I live collaboration. The dialogue both art forms have is my favorite part. I have said conversation is one of my favorite forms of art. Theater has helped me create artwork that will serve to start conversations. Theater has also allowed me to cross paths with other creative minds. I’ve also engaged with the English department over the years, and it’s so cool for these related but different art forms to collaborate with each other. English majors have given me a lot of the terminology and topics and history that I engage with in my art subjects, and the theater department has given a lot of the empathy and understanding of human relationships.

What do you want to stir in the viewer of your art? What is the purpose?

To compel people to know why they believe what they believe. To perceive and to engage with the world around them in an unconventional way.

Why unconventional?

It’s so much more interesting! It’s adventurous. Being aware of our surroundings and our influences and why we do what we do is really important, and unconventionality disrupts our ritual approach to life. I want to defamiliarize people with their way of thinking and approach
to life so they can better understand why they do the things they do and why they believe what they believe. And as a Christian artist, I really want to defamiliarize people with their preconceived notions of art, and especially Christian art. I want to show the postmodern, post-postmodern, or metamodern world, that I think they’re ready for a re-presentation of the Gospel, especially in art, and that the postmodernists, they’re right - there is no hope in humanity. I would love to join the historic conversation of art by saying that hope in humanity is dead, the postmoderns have killed it. There’s nothing for us here, without God.
COGNITIVE DISSONANCE
WHAT IS A SACRED PLACE
LESSONS IN SACRED MINUTIA
THEY WERE CARRIED ALONG BY THE SPIRIT
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