Acknowledgements

5 May 2011

Hearty thanks go to the following persons:

Professors in the Department of English and Writing, for recommending such fine student pieces, and students, for their outstanding work.

Our Writing Center assistants, Courtney Coiro, Luke Doty, Lizzie Engelberth, Garret Forsman, Cam Gayford, Steph Gogel, Bekah Hall, Mary Beth Stevens, and Evan Yeong. They served as first-round judges and as editors of the award-winning entries.

Our outside adjudicators—Bethany Smith, Baylor University, Writing 101 (Writing in the Liberal Arts and Integrative Studies 156 and 157 (Science Honors: Writing 1 and II) submissions; Dr. Matthew Roth, Messiah College, Writing 214 (Literary Non-Fiction) submissions; Dr. Heidi Oberholtzer Lee, Messiah College, Writing 215 (Life Narratives) submissions; and Dr. Jonathan Gates, Nyack College, English 207 (Introduction to Literary Studies) submissions—for the second-round (final) judging.

Mrs. Jane Miner, Academic Departments Coordinator, for laying out and formatting the booklet with great grace and speed.

Mrs. Arleen Jennings, Quick Print Manager, for publishing these booklets, also with great grace and speed.

Prof. Jim Wardwell, Chair of the Department of English and Writing and Associate Dean of Arts and Letters, for supporting this project.

This endeavor could not have come to fruition without all of you.

Sincerely,

Laurie A. Dashnau
Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center, Houghton College
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Stopping the Seafood Scarcity

Delicious, sizzling freshly battered fish and chips, smoked salmon with a drizzle of lemon, or a warm gooey tuna melt between crispy, toasted bread: These and many seafood dishes have been favorite staples of the North American diet. However, their prevalence is threatened by the unquenchable consumer appetite. The exploitation of the precious natural seafood resource of our oceans through overfishing is threatening to eliminate some of our favorite dishes from the menu. However, there is hope of preventing the complete disappearance of many of these delicious and ecologically important species. Human action must be taken to reduce our overconsumption, regulate the fishing industry, and rely more heavily on farmed fish to meet the world’s demand for seafood.

Since the 1970s, “new technology encouraged a tremendous intensification of fishing to meet the world’s rising demand for seafood” (Blackford 240). Consequently, global fish stocks have been increasingly overexploited. The peak of worldwide extraction of wild fish was 82 million metric tons in 1989, which has been declining since then due to depletion of fish stocks (Blackford 241). The effects of this overexploitation have had serious consequences on fish populations. In fact, in 2006, “UN officials concluded that . . . 50 percent [of the globe’s wild fish stocks] were fully exploited, and 25 percent were overexploited” (Blackford 241). The ocean’s fish stocks have not been able to support the rate at which fish are being extracted as fishing machinery and technology search farther and deeper to find fish.

Beyond the depletion of fish stocks, the insatiable pursuit of fish has grave ecological effects. One example is “bottom trawling, in which boats drag gear and nets along the seafloor, [which] can damage deepwater corals, sponges, and other features important for commercial and non-commercial species” (Festa, Rigas, and Boonhawer). Other types of fishing gear can also catch juvenile fish and threatened or endangered animals such as whales, sea turtles, and seabirds (Festa et. al). In addition, the large removal of biomass by fishermen can have unpredictable effects on ocean food chains. An example of one food chain that has been completely changed is the kelp forests (Festa, Rigas, and Boonhawer). The negative effects of the exploitation on countless aspects of our oceans are not justified in meeting the exorbitant demands of the world’s culture of overconsumption.

Overconsumption is one of the main problems that has pushed many of the world’s fish stocks into crisis. The attitude toward many resources on our planet is one of exploitation for maximum human gain, regardless of the deplorable damage that it causes. This attitude was adopted in regards to fish stocks as “many Americans in particular viewed the ocean much as they had looked upon the American West in an earlier time, as a nearly limitless cache of resources to be put to use” (Blackford 242). Unfortunately, the ocean’s supply of fish is limited and has fallen victim to this exploitative attitude. Obviously, the current practices for appropriately and sustainably harvesting fish are not working. Therefore, changing to the fundamental principles is required to save the fish populations. Public and government attention must be turned away from maximizing profits to a realization that the depletion of our fish stock is a serious problem. Attention must be given to rehabilitating and maintaining the fish populations we have so mercilessly depleted if we wish to enjoy fish fillets and seafood platters in the future.

With government intervention in the fishery industry, species populations have seen improvement and rehabilitation in the past. Such government regulation is essential to fixing the problem of overfishing. The salmon population is one species of fish that has benefited from intervention. After “cataclysmic declines . . . recovery of salmon primarily was due to human action—ban of fish traps, limited entry to the fisheries, enhancement of wild stocks via salmon ranching, and habitat rehabilitation”
Other species of fish are also projected to recover if similar action is taken. Atlantic Blue Fin Tuna, if moved to the endangered species list as formally proposed by Monaco, “would have some time to recover, much as the humpback whale rebounded after being listed in 1975” (Mahr, Abend, and Yuki). For many species of fish, it is not too late to restore the populations and continue to use them as a food source. However, the harvesting of the fish must be controlled and regulated. Regulation is not an easy task with the high demand and competition in the lucrative fishery business, but it is crucial to ensure that fish are available as a resource in the future.

Regulation that limits extraction from the oceans and reduce the ocean fisheries business may help greatly, but the natural fish populations in the oceans are not the only potential source of fish. The aquaculture of fish is a very viable option to relieve stress on the ocean’s fish stocks and to build on a sustainable infrastructure that is still based on seafood. There are reservations concerning the economic risk of the switch from larger fisheries to new aquaculture as well as environmental risks. However, the benefits of aquaculture outweigh the negative effects. Aquaculture has been shown to benefit the local economy. For instance, “many nongovernmental organizations (for example, Caritas in Bangladesh) promote small-scale aquaculture as a way to reduce local poverty and improve food security” (Diana 35). Similarly, the negative effects of the local environment may be considerable, but the benefit in preserving the larger ocean landscape and entire ecosystems arguably exceeds local negative effects.

Negative local effects are one of the foremost arguments against aquaculture, including use of resources to feed and sustain fish cultures, use of land, and handling of waste. One case of local destruction is use of sensitive land, such as the clear cutting of Mangrove trees in China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and India (Diana 33). However, many of the detrimental effects of aquaculture, such as the elimination of Mangrove trees or mishandling of waste, can be limited with effective establishment and maintenance of the aquaculture farming. Innovations to make such improvements to aquaculture are readily accepted by aquaculture managers because the more efficient systems reduce cost and are more sustainable (Diana 35). Currently aquaculture farming is already having positive impacts by helping to re-establish the wild populations and reduce the prevalence of damage to ocean environments. Both salmon and tuna species have benefited from the use of aquaculture to reduce pressure on natural stocks as well as “intentionally restock of natural populations with hatchery-reared fish” (Diana 34). Because of the potential harm caused by mismanagement of aquaculture, it is not a perfect solution. However, aquaculture is a much welcome alternative to systematically wiping out natural species and habitats of our oceans.

Fortunately, changes are already being put in place and awareness is rising concerning the need for sustainable sources of seafood. Whether the sustainable manner is fish caught under governmental regulation or farmed fish, the saving impact on the oceans resources is very large, while the cost and discomfort for the average fish consumer is very small. These solutions are available and have been proven effective. With the ability to preserve our favorite sea foods as well as preserve important ecosystems, we must embrace these solutions to save fish from an untimely disappearance, for the environment’s benefit and our own enjoyment.
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I ambled down the hallway, the vacuum cleaner sucking stray leaves and flecks of dirt from the carpet. A buzzing in my back pocket pulled me to a stop. I propped up the vacuum cleaner and reached for my phone. Flipping it open, I read the new message.

“Te amo, Nena.” (“I love you, Nena.”)

My lips curled into a smile at my father’s words. I slipped my phone into my back pocket and grabbed the handle of the vacuum cleaner once again. A sudden wave of sorrow wiped the smile off my face. I missed him more than I had realized. The blue flecks of the carpet started to blur as tears welled in the corners of my eyes. Soon they were streaming down my face, and any attempts to finish my cleaning job were futile. Head bent, I attempted to look focused and hoped no one would emerge from a room to see my sobbing mess of a face. My mind drifted back to my childhood.

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Gingerly I descended the stairs and peered at my father lounging comfortably on the sofa. Papa had disappeared to the basement where he was now enjoying a football game. I knew that it was more than just entertainment he was most likely looking for; he wanted some time alone.

Most people knew my father as a dynamic, rambunctious youth pastor, but my family and our closest friends knew he was an introvert. As a boy, he would wander off alone into the countryside for hours to embark on some new adventure. A father living in a busy suburb, a peaceful escape is much harder to find. When enough time presented itself Papa would take a visit to one on his favorite parks, but the majority of the time he had to settle for a football game. After a long day at work, flopping in front of the television was a chance to relax and be alone with his thoughts.

I hopped off the last step, wandered over, and plopped down on the couch next to him. Instead of sending me away as I expected, he put his arm around my shoulders and pulled my small frame toward him. I laid my head against his broad chest and relaxed into his embrace. Comfortably nestled against him, I took a moment to close my eyes and savor the safest place I knew.

Slowly my eyelids fluttered open and I stared blankly at the screen trying to make sense of the jumble. After several minutes, curiosity got the better of me. Hesitantly I dared to voice my confusion, “Papa, what’s going on?” Once again, I was surprised by his response. Slowly he introduced me to the important positions. He pointed at the screen to help me understand and identified the different strategies being used. Ecstatic, I leapt off the couch and ran to the television. Papa smiled knowingly and chuckled as my enthusiasm bubbled over into a million questions; he patiently answered each of them. Play by play and question by question, I began to piece together the details of the game.

My curiosity finally satisfied, I sank back onto the couch. Suddenly silent and content, I once again relaxed into my father’s arms. “Thank you, Papa,” I murmured quietly as my eyes began to droop closed. “Es mi placer, Nena” (“It’s my pleasure, Nena”) he responded giving me a gentle squeeze and kissing the top of my head. Gently he stroked my hair as I drifted off to sleep feeling cherished and at peace.

***
The memories clarified my sadness for me. I missed my Papa. I hadn’t realized how much I longed for his familiar embrace. I once again needed to sense that safety and security.

Months ago, I had told my father how much I would miss being wrapped in his big strong arms and hearing his deep comforting voice. I told him that I would miss beating up on him and wrestling in the middle of the living room floor. “I’m sure there will be plenty of young gentlemen at Houghton who would be happy to let a pretty little girl like you tackle them,” teased my father.

In a sense, Papa was right, but I was more right. Although there were hundreds of men milling around campus, for me they represent the unknown. Their playfulness, kindness, and affection, though appreciated, do not automatically make me feel safe and secure. I’ve received my fair share of hugs at college, none of them come close to being as meaningful as my Papa’s. No one else quite compares to my Papa, either. No one responds to my childlike exuberance, playful teasing, and tender heart the way my father does.

My father’s love frees me to be who I really am. My father appreciates me, cares for me, and protects me. I feel safe and cherished in my father’s arms.

Oh, how I miss my Papa.
Setbacks, Surrender, and Strategies: Finding Rest in God’s Strength

If we fight the Lord's battles merely by duplicating the way the world does its work, we are like little boys playing with wooden swords pretending they are in the battle while their big brothers are away in some distant bloody land. —Francis Schaeffer

Every person knows what it is like to experience times of doubt, despair, fear, bitterness, pride, and anger. More often than we realize, a battle is going on between God, who wants us to remain in him so that he can love us more fully, and the devil, who is trying desperately to get us to turn away from God. By recognizing that we are in the midst of this battle, we can learn how best to fight a “good fight” (2 Tim. 4.7). In the accounts of Left to Tell, Immaculèe Ilibagiza’s memoir, and Hinds’ Feet on High Places, Hannah Hurnard’s allegory of our faith journey, we see how the main characters, Immaculèe and Much-Afraid, are caught in this struggle as they repeatedly face fear, self-pity, pride, and bitterness. Each person experiences setbacks and temporary separation from God as she is caught off guard by the enemy’s clever attacks, and each learns to deal with the attacks of the enemy in a unique way. Both ultimately overcome the difficulties of these onslaughts through their faith and trust in God. By studying their different strategies of dealing with the enemy, we can gain insights on the best ways to confront and overcome the enemy and also learn how to totally surrender everything to God, the only one who can save us from the attacks of our own enemies.

During the Rwandan holocaust, Immaculèe Ilibagiza hides in a tiny bathroom with six other women, who are all in danger of being slaughtered by the Hutu Interahamwe extremists. It is during this time of hiding that Immaculèe is first keenly aware of dark, negative voice of the devil taunting her, whispering his half-truths into her ear. As he attacks her, he comes in various forms, trying to completely overwhelm her and turn her attention away from God. As the Interahamwe yell and chant on their searches, Immaculèe is overcome with despair and fear. Desperate, Immaculèe cries out to God to save her, but hears clearly the devil’s voice of despair whispering to her, “Why are you calling on God? Look at all of them out there . . . hundreds of them looking for you. They are legion, and you are one. You can’t possible survive, you won’t survive” (78). Fear overwhelms her, calling out, “They’re close, almost here . . . they’re going to find you, rape you, cut you, kill you!” (78). As Immaculée pleads for safety the voice of the evil one constantly continues, pulling her down, keeping her captive to fear. Immaculée’s first experience with the enemy is intensely real, and it leaves her in a place of fear that God never intended for her. Hearing the voice constantly in her mind, she begins “letting it convince” her that all the lies and terrors it speaks of are true (80). She has not yet learned the best way to ward off the devil and, because of this, she ends up physically and emotionally drained as she tries to resist him in her own strength.

In Hinds’ Feet on High Places we follow Much-Afraid on her journey to the High Places. Along the way, Much-Afraid encounters her enemies who try to stop her from continuing on her journey. The circumstances under which she must face and confront her enemies are much different from that of Immaculèe. Before she is even able to begin on her journey to the High Places she must make the choice to follow the Shepherd’s voice. This decision is difficult because everyone in her family is trying desperately to make her stay home. They talk and argue with her for so long that she is completely overwhelmed and in “a state of bewilderment and incoherent fear” (32). Because she listens to them for so long she has a hard time recollecting what she values most in life. Consequently, when the Shepherd calls her she merely sits “cowering in [the] midst” of her family, the Fearings (32). It takes her quite some time to come to her senses and realize that what she wants most is to be with the Shepherd. Listening to her enemies for so long almost dissuades her from following the Shepherd and causes her a considerable amount of unnecessary anxiety. Though Much-Afraid has grown up living amongst her enemies, she is no
better at shielding herself from their vicious attacks than Immaculèe, and both Immaculèe and Much-Afraid find it utterly exhausting as they try, in their own strength, to free themselves from the grip of fear and doubt.

Eventually, Immaculèe and Much-Afraid realize that in order not to be destroyed by their enemies, they must surrender everything to God. Hidden in that tiny bathroom, Immaculèe slowly begins to understand the “how” of total surrender to God. For weeks she struggles with the part of The Lord’s Prayer in which we say, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” because hatred and bitterness towards the Interahamwe rage in her heart (91). Eventually, though, through praying and meditating on God’s word every day, she begins to feel that she can be in the very presence of God. Immaculèe comes to understand, however, that she can only forgive with God’s help and love, and that even if her parents are dead, she will never be an orphan. Surrendering herself daily into God’s will brings her the feeling of being “the daughter of the kindest, most powerful king the world [has] ever known” (106). In that bathroom she discovers that the way to total freedom is through total surrender. As she surrenders herself daily to God’s will and strength, she allows God to mold her into what he wants her to be. Through her striving to be closer to God she places herself in his will so that, after the genocide, she may be used as an instrument of peace and forgiveness.

Throughout her journey, Much-Afraid must repeatedly surrender her will to the Shepherd as a love offering of sorts. Each time she surrenders another part of herself, she finds that she has more strength to face the next challenges along the way. When she finally gets to the end of the path that leads to the Kingdom of Love she realizes that in order to enter in she must give up that which she holds most dear: her human desire to be loved. But through her long journey she has come to trust in the Shepherd and to desire only to do his will, so with very little hesitation she lays all her hopes and fears before him on an alter as a burnt offering. As she watches them burn up, a “sense of utter, overwhelming rest and peace engulfs Much-Afraid” (187). Yet it is not until this point when she surrenders everything to the Shepherd that he can truly change her and give her the hinds’ feet for which she has been longing, as with surrender come healing and restoration (184-87). Immaculèe and Much-Afraid both wrestle with surrendering everything to God, and it is not until they have given up everything that they are in the best place for God to mold them into his hands and feet.

As Immaculèe and Much-Afraid grow in their faith, they recognize that it is through surrendering their lives and wills to their Heavenly Father that they can best counter the enemy who so often attacks. Immaculèe realizes the only way to keep the negative voices out of her head is to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5.17). It does not take long for her to notice that whenever she prays, whenever she is in God’s presence, she “[feels] His love around [her], and [the attacks] ease” (84). Any moment she does not spend in prayer “[becomes] an invitation for Satan to stab [her] with his double-edged knife of doubt and self-pity” (85). Prayer, then, becomes her wall that the devil’s quite malicious voice cannot penetrate. As she draws closer to God and meditates on his Word, she is able to appreciate the power and comfort of prayer and is able to spend twenty hours at a time in prayer, staying constantly in God’s presence and not “giv[ing] the devil a foothold” (Eph 4.27; 84-85).

As Much-Afraid continues on her journey, she finds that some of her enemies, such as Resentment, Self-Pity, and Bitterness, are constantly following her and taunting her, but as her trust in the Shepherd grows their chances to distract her decrease. Much-Afraid begins to understand that when the Shepherd gives a promise such as “I assure you . . . never for a moment shall I be beyond your reach or call for help, even when you cannot see me” (52), he means what he says and can be taken at his word. By surrendering herself continuously to the Shepherd and putting herself in the care of his servants, Much-Afraid is able to have fewer encounters with her enemies that would slow her down or even cause her to turn back (87). Thus we see that Immaculèe and Much-Afraid learn the best strategy of keeping the devil and his lies far away is surrendering everything. By drawing near to God, they allow him to shield them from the attacks of the enemy.
In both their battles, Immaculèe and Much-Afraid struggle with the voice of the enemy, one that taunts them and distracts them from God. As they “walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” they truly come to understand that they can “fear no evil” when God’s hand is leading them (Ps. 23.4). Immaculèe was faced with the overwhelming despair of meeting with a horrible, humiliating death. She learns to pray constantly and is thus able to “put on the full armor of God” (Eph. 6.13), fully surrendering herself to his will. Because she allowed God to work in her life, she has in turn been able to lead other people down the path of forgiveness (209). Though Much-Afraid’s journey took her through different kinds of struggles than Immaculèe she also had to come to the place of offering all of her hopes and dreams to God, to do with as he chose. We see that Immaculèe and Much-Afraid are excellent examples of the words of the psalmist: “He rescued me from my powerful enemies, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support” (Ps. 18.16-18). Their enemies were strong, too strong for them, but they found support and hope in the Lord. They found that when they tried to use their own strength to rid themselves of their enemies of fear and doubt they could not move forward. When they instead gave the battle to God, they found a victory beyond what they could have imagined.

We all face “enemies” as we go through life, though many of us do not recognize them for what they really are. Sometimes a busy schedule alone can pull us away from God. Nevertheless, by God’s grace we too can learn how to recognize the subtle ways in which the devil diverts our attention from God. Whoever or whatever our enemies are, if we allow God to fight our battles for us, we can be sure he will surround us with his love and lead us on the path he has planned for our lives.

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The Bible. New International Version.


Many intellectual Christians have an immediate reaction when they hear of a film or a piece of writing labeled “Christian.” Certain names—Beverly Lewis, Tim LeHay, Ted Dekker—drive us away. We think of the basic form of a cheap thriller or romance novel, sans sex and profanity, supplemented with prayers and perhaps a conversion. It’s almost as if quality Christian writing ending with Lewis and Chesterton. The cause of Christian’s failure to create vibrant, accessible, mature art is not always immediately apparent, apart from the frequent poor quality of the creations. But one of the main reasons that Christian art is or has been somewhat of an oxymoron is that many Christian film makers and writers, or at least those accepted by the general Christian community, do not ask questions. There is a false perception among Christians that a “Christian artist” must preach, must tell, must instruct and evangelize and save. And this does not make for good art.

Part of the problem with Christian cultural products is explained by Dallas Jenkins, a filmmaker and the son of Left Behind author Jerry Jenkins. He discusses some of the failings of Christian films on his blog. He writes, “In ‘Christian film,’ you’ve got a genre defined entirely by its message. There is nothing else like this in entertainment, other than perhaps ‘gay films.’” He goes on to say what most people interested in the arts know, that in good, solid creations, story and character come first and message flows from that. The problem with Christian creations then, is that “by their very nature, most … aren’t going to be very good because they have to fall within certain message-based parameters.” It is true that this is the fault not only of Christian creations, but of most genre work—sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, etc.—that when a work is created with a message or with prerequisite requirements in mind, you lose a lot of potential creativity. In the words of movie producer Samuel Goldwyn, “Pictures are for entertainment, messages should be delivered by Western Union” (Couretas).

However, many Christians are wary of those who create outside of this “Christian” label, even those artists who profess faith but who refuse to conform to the restrains of the “Christian” section of the bookstore. As Greg Wolfe writes, “We have all encountered paranoid fundamentalists looking for evidence of the occult—or for any indication whatsoever that human beings have a sexual life—in every canvas and short story they examine” (38). Even thoughtful Christians, he says, often are wary of potentially controversial art. On the other hand, you have many “liberal Christians” who have “sought enlightenment and thrills from the East, from C.G. Jung, from neopaganism, witchcraft, and other forms of primitivism” (Wolfe, p.49). An unfortunate reaction to such extremes are skittish mainstream Christians who regard Donald Miller with suspicion and are cautious of Madeleine L’Engle, uncomfortable even with C.S. Lewis’ The Great Divorce. In being overcautious, they miss out on L’Engle’s beautiful literary style and her deep love and her theology of redemption of even the worst evil in the world. They miss out on Donald Miller’s insights into how Christians can and should interact with the world.

In large part, this is because the Christian world, especially the conservative Christian world, has lost or given up its ability to ask questions about its faith and about our lives in a fallen world without feeling that it has lost its grip on the fundamentals of Christianity and spun out into apostasy. Makoto Fujimura recently wrote a piece called “A Letter to North American Churches.” He addresses the churches of North America about their break with the arts, writing,

You began to believe in the late 18th century that we needed rational categories, to try to protect ‘faith’ from ‘reason.’ Reason began to win the battle in this false dichotomy. […] You began to exile artists whose existence, up to that point, helped to fuse the invisible reality with concrete reality. An artist knows that...
what you can see and observe is only the beginning of our journey to discover the world. But you wanted proof, instead of mystery; justification instead of beauty. Therefore you pushed artists to the margins of worship, while the secular world you helped to create championed us, and gave us, ironically, a priestly role.

(Fujimura points out what seems to be the crux of this issue: that North American Christians, especially evangelicals, have a hard time coming to grips with mystery in faith. Now, more often than not, Christians want “proof, instead of mystery; justification instead of beauty.” And questioning faith, exploring and probing who God is in relation to a world in which deeply evil things happen, is threatening to a culture that wants proof and justification, a culture that wants reason and is uncomfortable with mystery.

Maryilyn McEntyre, the Christian author of *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, writes about paradox and ambiguity, saying “we live in mystery” (54). Although she is writing about the use of English, I think there’s a broader application when she talks about “what Keats called ‘negative capability’—the capacity to dwell in paradox or ambiguity without straining after resolution. To inhabit, as it were, two dimensions or points of view at once, and calmly” (54). This is essential for good art that wishes to avoid a didactic or pedantic tone. Wolfe states that dogma is not “antithetical to mystery” (53). Indeed, he points out that of “the great religious writers and artists . . . nearly all of them were theologically orthodox” and they all had a sense for “the need for balance between flesh and spirit, concrete form and abstract idea” (53). Wolfe believes and discusses this idea that mysteries are “preserved and enshrined by the dogma of the church” (53). But implicit in this idea is that dogma at its best is not didactic. This is an important point: that one can acknowledge and value the mysteries of the Christian faith and the mysteries that come with being human that drive us to ask questions without being faithless or agnostic.

Fujimura writes in his “Letter,” “You [the church] gave away artistic expression to the secular culture. And yet do you not know that Our Father in Heaven owns all of the earth?” He echoes Augustine’s statement that is often repeated in Christian liberal arts circles, “All truth is God’s truth.” Authors often write books or make movies that, while not “Christian,” can still edify believers. Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris* asks many questions about God and about believers and how the physical world relates to and perceives the presence of God and the divine. Glück is not a Christian, is unwilling to even use the word “God” to describe what she calls “divinity, or celestial presence” (Cavalieri). Yet her work is beautiful literature and asks some questions that not only every human being but especially Christians must ask if they are to be honest about their faith and their doubts about how (or if) God works in the world and in the lives of his creations. Cormac McCarthy’s work is often bleak, yet his book *The Road* is powerful in its portrayal of love between a father and son, and how at the end of all human society and even all hope, what are left is relationships. What separates the “good guys” from the “bad guys” is whether or not they have given up on love and compassion and sacrificial kindness. McCarthy’s work is not Christian, and if he has any faith he doesn’t openly discusses it; and yet his work has great implications for both Christians and human beings in general.

A pattern emerges when we look at quality artistic creations: they are potentially accessible and meaningful for everyone, of all faiths and backgrounds. Obviously, more specific works and styles won’t appeal to or resonate with everyone. But good art asks questions or explores issues with which everyone has to deal. It doesn’t preach. Usually it doesn’t answer any questions, but moves the reader, the viewer, the observer, the listener to further thought. An example of a popular cultural product that does this would be the recent television series *Lost*. The series introduced innumerable mysteries and plot twists, not all of which were answered. The show had no agenda, but raised significant questions and addressed issues of faith, individual choice and freedom, good versus evil, justice, sacrifice, and many others. There were themes and archetypes that resonated with Christians and non-Christians alike—an almost-Christ figure, a Satan figure. The metaphors were visible but were fortunately imperfect. It was a story first, but if a
viewer wished could lead to philosophical contemplation and discussion. But at its best, *Lost* focused on characters and relationships. That is, they focused on the effect that the plot had on the characters. What interests us most in a story or other works of art is how we can relate to it as human beings. Courretas points out that “the power of narrative lies in its ability to reach the whole person, the heart *and* the head. . . . Aristotle made room for Pathos, along with Logos and Ethos.”

If Christians want to create films, artwork, and literature that really moves, that really affects people spiritually and intellectually, we cannot settle for instructing. An openness and willingness to ask questions and a cultivation of the art of dwelling comfortably in the paradox of our faith are essential for any artist, but most of all for a Christian. Christians must realize that by closing themselves off to questions and even controversy, they are missing out on spiritual, intellectual, and personal growth. Good, true art questions and wrestles with the uncertainties of being human. And until the Christian community at large is willing and able to question without losing faith, it will continue to impact only those who are already within its well-defended cultural borders.

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Andy Crouch says, “Culture is the realm of human freedom—its constraints and impossibilities are the boundaries within which we can create and innovate” (35). Humans have an intrinsic need to create culture. It is necessary, as Crouch says, to our freedom. Society fails to realize the responsibility we as citizens of culture have to invoke that freedom. Instead of creating, we “condemn . . . critique . . . copy . . . and consume” (68-69). The film *The City of the Lost Children* portrays a dystopian culture where childhood is a lost cause and human life is a scientific experiment. A lonely inventor creates for himself a wife, six identical clone children of himself, a brain in a fish tank, and his masterpiece, a brilliant man. A genetic malfunction causes the wife to be very short, the children to fall asleep at random, and the intelligent man not to be able to dream. After the brilliant man, Krank, attacks his creator and throws him into the sea, he takes over the laboratory, desperately trying to solve his dreamless defect. He uses an army of Cyclops, who willingly give up their sight in exchange for a mechanical eye, to steal children, who Krank uses to steal their dreams. The story follows One, a strong, gentle man, and Miette, a young, keen girl, who try to track down the Cyclops to recover One’s little brother, Denree. Each character tries to affect the culture—both positively and negatively—to deal with the impact it has on their lives. The characters in the 1995 film *The City of the Lost Children* react towards their dystopian culture according to Andy Crouch’s condemning, critiquing, copying, consuming, and creating culture strategies.

When faced with a culture that denies natural human freedoms, a common reaction is to run. Instead of going back and stopping Krank, the Creator hides himself in a submarine so he does not have to deal with the consequences of the mistakes he created. When Miette finds herself safe and in his submarine, she asks if she has seen him before. He responds, “No one ever sees me. . . . I’m only underwater. . . . It’s dangerous up there” (Jeunet and Caro). He knows the world above him is fundamentally wrong, but he refuses to do anything about it. The Creator’s problem lies with his inaction towards the culture he condemns. Retreating in this manner is similar to what Andy Crouch refers to as “condemning culture” (Crouch 68). He claims that “if all we do is condemn culture . . . we are very unlikely indeed to have any cultural effect, because human nature abhors a cultural vacuum” (68). The Creator tries to detach himself from the cultural world, and consequently, he loses his ability to change it. The Creator learns that, “There is no withdrawing from culture. Culture is inescapable” (36) when he receives a desperate cry for help from Uncle Irvin, one of his earliest inventions. But, because all he has done is condemn culture, his best reaction is to irrationally attempt to blow the laboratory up, children and all. He blows himself up, just in time to realize that the children and his inventions were saved, and his suicidal heroic action was useless.

Instead of condemning culture outright, some characters choose to “critique it” (68). In short, “[They] analyze [the culture], critiquing [it] carefully to show how they are inadequate or misguided” (Crouch 68). Gabriel Marie, the leader of the Cyclops, claims to have been sent to the “world of appearances” (Jeunet and Caro), as a messenger sent by the Creator to save the souls of those trapped in a “world of dogs. Litter of dogs!” (Jeunet and Caro). He warns the aspiring followers to “Beware because this sordid world of temptation and perversion is also the world of desire” (Jeunet and Caro). His judgment on the world turns into a cause, where sight is lost and replaced with a third, mechanical eye. Though he does end up calling his followers to take action, starting a religion is arguably one of the biggest forms of critique. Georgia Harkness, a Methodist theologian, warns against religion because “the tendency to turn human judgments into divine commands makes religion one of the most dangerous forces in the whole world.” Because Gabriel’s religion does not seek to correct the rest of the world of appearances, he has little cultural effect, and his mission is futile.
Copying culture is a fatal mistake because it neither produces any change nor has any real effects on the mainstream. Copying culture merely “provide[s] a safe haven from the mainstream . . . replacing the offensive bits with more palatable ones” (69). In the characters of the six clones, each one is a mere copy of the next. They were created to be and act the same. The Creator made no change to the cultural mainstream by creating six copies of himself. He longed to rid himself of the loneliness—which arguably he did—but by producing nothing new, his influence ends there. Similarly, Krank tries to copy culture by stealing the dreams of little children. By taking their dreams, he hopes to achieve for himself a new culture where he can dream. Reality hits hard when Krank realizes that the children’s dreams always turn to nightmares when he enters into them. Uncle Irvin explains that, “the evil is inside [Krank]” (Jeunet and Caro) and he is their nightmare. The clone children and Krank’s dreams are counterfeit, and do not change anything.

Perhaps the easiest way to deal with the culture is to consume it. The children, under the power of the Siamese twins, though limited by their youth, mindlessly allow society to tell them that they cannot change anything. Day after day, they steal jewels, money, and valuables to give to the twins. They allow this to be their reality. Even after seeing Miette stand up for herself and leave, they still do not understand. When Miette’s crew finds her, they want her to come back. She tells them that “One may be big, but he is not grown up. And maybe [they aren’t] so little either” (Jeunet and Caro). She attempts to show them even though they are little, they do not have to stay under the Twins’ influence, but they still walk away. Similarly, the clones allow themselves to believe that they are not different. Instead of creating something new of themselves, they imitate each other’s words and actions. When one is hit, he turns and hits another, who in turn would hit the next, until all of the children have hit and been hit. In the same way, when one starts crying, they will all start to cry. This behavior continues until rumors of an original clone circulate. When Uncle Irvin tells one of the clones that he is the original, the clone suddenly feels enabled to do as he wills. But fighting against a culture ingrained in their world makes the clone realize that “it is hard to be original” (Jeunet and Caro). Crouch says “that it should not be too surprising that consumption is an ineffective way to bring cultural change” (Crouch 72) and “the reality of life . . . is that [people] . . . can only very rarely consume their way into culture change” (72). If the clones and the children truly desire to change the culture they live in, they must stop consuming it.

Culture can change, but “not because of condemnation, critique, copying or consumption” (72). Rather, there is a way to try and change culture that will actually alter it. Crouch says that “Creativity is the only viable source of change” (73, italics mine). According to dictionary.com, creativity is the “ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, [and] interpretations.” Miette changes culture in the movie. Miette, unwilling to live under the tyranny of the twins, encourages One to embark on a journey to save Denree and the children. When she meets the Creator, he tries to make her stay underwater with him. He urges her saying, “It’s dangerous! . . . You’re just a kid. . . . He takes [the children]. The devil takes them away in his boat. He takes them away to Hell” (Jeunet and Caro). Miette, refusing to be limited by her youth, leaves the Creator and continues on her journey. Once Miette and One find the laboratory, Miette must enter into Denree’s dream, where both Denree and Krank are, in order to save Denree. Bravely, she asks Krank to take Denree’s place. Eventually she defeats Krank, trading her youthfulness for his age, and transforming him into a young toddler. Once defeating Krank, Miette and One rescue the children, the clones, the wife, and Uncle Irvin, and leave the laboratory.

When we want to change culture, we must be creative. We cannot be like the Creator and hide underwater and condemn culture. Though religion provides refuge, we must not hide behind it, judging the world and never doing anything in it, as do Gabriel and his followers. Like the clones and children’s dreams, we cannot just copy culture and expect something new to come from it. We cannot consume the culture in the hope that it will somehow get better as the children and the clones do. Rather, we must be like Miette, willing to condemn culture, and use creativity to “offer an alternative” (Crouch 68) to the
culture that surrounds us. In the words of Mahatma Ghandi, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Works Cited


Evan Yeong  
Prof. Dan Bowman  
Third Place

Someone to Look Up To

Take a few seconds to a minute and list the first five Asian actors that come to mind. When you finally have them, think about how long it took you to come up with the list, and if you even managed to come up with five. If it took you over thirty seconds or close to a minute, lose a point. If you chose either Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee as actors, lose a point for each. If all of the actors you came up with play (or have played) roles associated with martial arts, lose another point. If you’re closer to negative five than to zero, then I hope that your view of Asians in American cinema is already a little bit clearer.

“Asians” first began appearing in American cinema in the early 1900s. I say “Asians” because the first Asian roles were all played by white people, such as Mary Pickford as Cho-Cho-San and Richard Barthelmess as Cheng Huan (I). If this choice to cast Caucasian actors in Asian roles were not insulting enough, Asians were almost always stereotyped, as “American audiences liked their Asians to be psychopathic Fu Man Chus or comic laundrymen and cooks” (Adams). Oddly enough these two trends continue on to the present day (although slightly altered), and Asian roles continue to be given to Caucasians, while Asian actors are forced to pick and choose from crude cultural stereotypes.

Anyone with even a slight interest in the very classy Audrey Hepburn has seen the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Not having seen it myself, I know of the film mainly due to the character of Mr. Yunioshi, a Japanese man portrayed by Mickey Rooney. A gross depiction of how Japanese people speak and act, this film, which was released in the early 60s, contains a character who is the epitome of yellowface to many. The term “yellowface” relates to the practice of white actors “yellowing their skin…and tightly taping their eyelids to appear Asian” (Winfrey). Rooney’s character bumbles around in front of the camera, a clumsy, eccentric man who yells down at Hepburn’s character using “Japanese ranguage,” replacing his L’s with R’s and vice versa. The fact that this film is considered a classic to this day has had an adverse effect on many Asians, both Japanese and otherwise. It is shocking to them to be faced with the fact that in this culture this sort of racism might be tolerated or overlooked. This idea is compounded by the fact that in this culture we live in there are still very few Asian role models for people to look up to.

To discuss the present day, allow me to first address the topic of Caucasian actors taking Asian actors’ roles. The most recent (and clear) occurrence of this happening is in the movie *21*, a film about a group of MIT students who go to Vegas with the plan to count cards and make a killing playing blackjack. In the film the cast is predominantly white. Having been based on a true story, in actuality the real life team was almost entirely Asian-American. To add insult to injury, the studio even admitted to wanting “an all-white cast with an Asian girl as a love interest” (Lee). To bring up an even more recent (as of the summer of 2010) film, Shyamalan’s *The Last Airbender* has garnered its fair share of casting controversy. Choosing to cast the three principal protagonists as Caucasian in spite of the show it was based off of being definitively “Asian influenced” made the director the subject of a lot of negative press (Lasswell). Another film based off of a cartoon (this one clearly Japanese whereas the other was American) is *Dragonball: Evolution*, yet another example of a film where a Caucasian is cast to play what was and is globally thought to be an Asian character. Popular video blogger KevJumba likens the protagonist, Goku, to the Asian Superman, a character countless Asian children look up to. In spite of all the controversy that has arisen Hollywood continues to set its sights on its main goal: making money. As far as the people there are concerned, Asian actors are far from bankable.

At this point your hands might start to raise, questions beginning to rise in your throats. “But wait, there are lots of Asians in cinema, there’s totally a market for them!” you may cry, “How can you say Hollywood doesn’t give Asians a chance?” In direct response to your hypothetical queries, allow me
to refer back to that one point you may or may not have lost in the first paragraph. The statement was: “If all the actors you came up with play (or have played) roles associated with martial arts, lose another point.” To rattle a few actors off of the top of my head there is Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee (yes, those were the first two I thought of as well), Lucy Liu, Chow-Yun-fat, Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, and the list goes on. Every single one of these actors has played a role that has to do with martial arts. To name the other niche Asian actors fit in to, consider how Asians rate on a comedy scale of one to ten. If you scored them as being at least over six then you know where I’m going with this. Ken Jeong of NBC’s Community, John Cho of the Harold and Kumar films, and Leonard Nam of The Perfect Score; all three actors are fine examples of the laid back, goofy Asian character that audiences are beginning to become very familiar with. Dev Patel of Slumdog Millionaire fame has publicly complained about being typecasted, saying “Asian actors tend not to be sent Hollywood scripts that are substantial or challenging,” and that he is “likely to be offered the roles of a terrorist, cab driver and smart geek” (Child). The stereotypes have shifted from suspicious and foreign to dangerous and funny, but they continue to be prevalent in our media.

Until Hollywood, and really, America, realizes that Asians are a large part of both their culture and society—Asians make up 14 million of the people in the United States (“State and County QuickFacts: USA”)—Asians will continue to be overlooked and stereotyped in the media. Culture creates media just as media creates culture, and unless action is taken to create new viewpoints or mindsets, nothing will change. Asians will continue to be a part of this country but will have no one of the same ethnicity to look up to when they turn on the TV or walk into a theatre.
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Phong Ho died on a Wednesday in March, just before noon. It was cold outside, but the sun was out. Piles of snow, left over from the storm three days earlier, lined the sidewalks of Philadelphia and glistened in the sunlight. People milled around the city doing whatever it is people do. Go to work, go to school, eat lunch. To most, the day Phong Ho died was a perfectly ordinary, maybe even mediocre, day.

I was sitting at my kitchen table when it happened. I was eating breakfast alone, completely unaware that my life as I knew it had just ended because of what had transpired miles away, at the opposite end of the city, in a subway station in North Philly.

***

“Stop moving!”

It was January. I glared fiercely at Phong as he snapped back to attention on my living room couch. “Stop moving your head,” I growled. “Drawing people is hard and you’re not making it any easier on me. And don’t answer either!” I added quickly. “Mouths are hard enough to draw without you moving yours all the time.”

He grinned and stuck his tongue out at me, then went still as a statue. I continued drawing and we sat across from each other in silence for a few minutes. I’d been working on this drawing for several hours. I’d been excited when he had agreed to be a model for one of the drawings for my college portfolio, but this was taking longer than I’d expected. I was too nitpicky about getting the details just right, not to mention that he himself was a constant distraction.

“My neck hurts.”

I started shading in the nose. “Too bad.”

He swiveled his head around a few times to stretch his neck before returning to his pose. “How’s it goin’? Is it looking like a human yet?”

I stopped and appraised the drawing for a moment. “It doesn’t look enough like you. I want it to be you.”

“So I’ll be here for a while?” An exaggerated sigh. “I have other things to do, you know. Important things. I’m a busy man.”

I gave him a Look. He gave me an expression of angelic innocence in return as he replied, “Dissidia won’t beat itself, Trish.”

Video games. Always with the video games. I rolled my eyes, then looked at the drawing again. Not even close. “How do you feel about coming back tomorrow?”

He grinned, then remembered himself and tried to move his lips as little as possible as he replied, “I’ll come sometime after work?”

“Okay. Sorry I’m hurting your neck so much. I just wanna get it right.”
“Hey, it’s worth it if it means I get to spend more time with you,” Phong said seriously. Without moving his head, he reached one hand over to briefly hold my hand. I smiled.

“Good answer.”

***

We had been dating since January of 2008. I technically was not allowed to date until I turned 16, in March, so we danced around the edge of that restriction for the first month and a half. We talked, either in person or online, almost every day. We learned everything we possibly could about each other. Having been friends for so long already, we loved teasing each other and making each other “mad.” His silly jokes and stories made me laugh constantly, a service that I returned as much as possible. He had a wonderful laugh, and a beautiful smile. I tried to make him use them as often as possible.

***

“I never really smile. I don’t think I can.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “You can’t smile. Yeah. And the sky is green.” Phong giggled, and I immediately poked his cheeks. “So if you can’t smile, what’s that thing on your face, right there?”

He stepped back and scowled fiercely at me. The look failed to impress. “You trying to say something about my face, woman?”

“What was your mouth doing?”

His glare intensified. “That was not a smile.”

“Oh, really?” Rather than intimidating, his false angry face was hilarious to me. I resisted the urge to poke him again.

“Yes, really. I don’t smile without laughing. I laugh, I don’t smile. I don’t just—” He cut himself off mid-sentence to flash me a toothy smile that looked more like a grimace and made his eyes totally disappear, then continued, “—like that. I can’t do it.”

“You’re dumb,” I informed him, giggling.

He took a beautifully sarcastic bow. “I try.”

“You do so smile. You smile all the time. You have an awesome smile.”

He snorted. I grabbed the offending nose and pulled him down five inches to my eye level. “You do. And I will show you. Every time you smile from now on I am going to point it out.”

He grinned and mumbled congestedly, “I can’t breathe.”

I let go. And as he took a few deep breaths, the wide grin never leaving his face, I pointed triumphantly. “There’s one now.”

***
We rarely fought, and the few times we did, the issue was resolved quickly. There was no room in our relationship for anger or pettiness. I loved him, both as a best friend and as a possible future spouse. We discussed the logistics of getting engaged just before I went away to college, and marriage after graduation. We talked about what we wanted to do with our futures, and after some time I couldn’t even imagine a future without Phong. I figured life without him was from now on not only unimaginable, but completely impossible. He wasn’t perfect, not by any means; but he was something I hadn’t expected to find for years to come. And he felt the same towards me.

Maybe it was early for us to be thinking that way. We were young, in love for the first time, young and stupid. But we began dating when we were both fifteen, and stayed together for over a year. A year is an eternity when you’re so young. And it felt like it would last forever.

***

On March 4, 2009, I went in to work at four in the afternoon, just as I always did. I worked in the library a few blocks from my house, helping kids with their homework after school. The 2008-2009 school year would be my last of three years working there; once I graduated high school, my position wouldn’t be available to me anymore. The years at the library had been good for me though… I had friends there. Great friends. Leaving would be depressing.

My friend and coworker Lisa didn’t come in to work until an hour after I got there, but as soon as she arrived I pulled her into the supply closet to talk to her. I was a mess that day and desperately needed to talk to her. To Lisa. The girl who had pushed for me and Phong to get together, who had helped us both throughout the course of our over one-year relationship, who was one of our best friends. She listened in disbelief as I told her how he had broken up with me the night before.

Everything was wrong. We had made plans just days earlier to spend time together that night after work. Spend time together, not separate. What was happening? Phong had picked me up to walk me home from work, as usual. He had seemed unusually solemn, yes, and I had thrown a snowball at his face in an attempt to make him laugh, at least smile. What’s wrong, I’d asked. Nothing, he’d answered, smiling. A forced smile. Not the wide, crooked smile that I’d always loved. And it slipped off his face in seconds. He was lying. Something was very wrong.

When you love someone deeply, one of the most heartwrenching things they can tell you is that they couldn’t care less about you. And there I was, sitting on my porch as the boy I loved more than anything else in the world told me that he hadn’t loved me for two months now. That we had to break up. That we didn’t have anything in common. I was leaving for college soon; how would we be able to keep this up over such a long distance? He couldn’t do it, he told me. He wouldn’t do it.

I was in shock, and so was unable to pull up the memory files that would have proven all of these things to be lies. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t look closely enough at his face to see the misery barely covered up by a blank, apathetic mask; who can see the pain of others when your own is overwhelming you?

I somehow found breath long enough to say something.

“That was a short forever.”

***
“It’s… done!” I exclaimed, putting the finishing touches on the upper lip. I put down my pencil and placed the paper gently on the living room table. Phong and my parents leaned in to look at it.

My mom decided to state the obvious. “That looks like him!”

“I would have kept on drawing if it didn’t.” I looked askance at Phong and poked him in the side. “What do you think?” Poke. Poke.

He poked me back, then gave me two thumbs up and grinned. “Nice.”

“And it only took me three days to do it… Thanks for being such a great model.”

He said goodnight to my parents, then we walked out onto my porch together. He cracked his neck a few times, exaggeratedly. “I can move my head again!” he said, acting surprised at his new freedom. “Yay!”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “You and your neck.” He giggled and wrapped me up tight in a hug. “Thanks for that, it turned out really good,” I said, my voice muffled slightly by his shoulder. “You’re awesome.”

He laughed, then ruffled my hair. “Not as awesome as you!” He paused to kiss my forehead. “You awesome little artist, you.”

“Whatever.” I knew arguing my point was futile. I let it go at that. We stood there in silence for a moment or two.

“So I will see you tomorrow?”

Everything about him made me smile. I hid it in his arm. “Of course.”

“I love you.”

I leaned back out of his embrace to look him in the eyes. Those warm, clear brown eyes. I never could resist them. I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him.

“Forever and ever.”

“And ever,” he agreed. He stared at me for a moment, a slight smile pulling at the corners of his lips, before pulling me closer into his arms. “See you soon.”

***

He’d sworn to never leave me, to love me forever. Why was he breaking all of his promises? He tried to hold me, comfort me as I fell apart on my porch steps. “Don’t touch me,” I spat through the tears, and he quickly withdrew.

He stood close to the street, far from me. It felt like he was moving farther and farther away from me, in every possible way, but I had one last thing to say. I needed to say it. For his sake.

“Promise me you won’t do anything to hurt yourself.”

***
“If it weren’t for you, I’d have ended it a long time ago.”

***

The look on his face was unfathomable. “I won’t.”

“You won’t promise or—”

“I won’t hurt myself.”

My tears blinded me, and by the time I raised my head and could see again, he was long gone. Vanished, like a puff of smoke. Like he’d never been there at all. He had always been good at that—but this time, for the first time, he didn’t come back.

I found out mere hours later that he was already in another relationship, with a girl who had supposedly been my friend. I talked to a couple of his friends about it that night; they’d had no idea it was coming. They called him stupid. I agreed. It was the first time in all the time I had known him that I had ever been angry at Phong Ho.

***

Lisa and I walked out of the closet together. I felt a little better, but not much. I felt different. My hopelessness was slowly being channeled into anger. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*, I thought viciously (Congreve 46). His best friend was interested in me; how would he react if we started going out? Revenge seemed sweet, but still… wrong. Even if I wanted to deny it, I was still in love. I didn’t want to do something that cruel to him. But the bitter, hateful thought stayed in my mind.

I went back to work, but about fifteen minutes later, someone I immediately recognized as Phong’s older brother Paul entered the library. I had never seen him in person; I had only ever seen pictures and heard stories via Phong, so it was strange that Paul should be here, now. The day after his little brother had ended everything and then told me to get over it.

He walked up to me and Lisa and asked, “Which one of you is Phong’s girlfriend?”

A silly question. He knew Phong’s girlfriend wasn’t Asian, and Lisa was very obviously Asian. Why was he asking this? But I humored it, saying, “I am.” *I am his ex-girlfriend. He left me. It’s over. What do you want with me?*

Something was wrong. I could feel it. I had no idea what it was, but there was something off about this whole situation. A cold, unnamed terror was descending on my mind; I could see it in Paul’s eyes that something had happened.

I followed him into the library stacks, the fear growing in my mind as he wordlessly led me away from the main area of the library. He stopped at the end of the row and turned toward me with a face of stone.

Then came those two small, inconceivable words.

“Phong’s dead.”
There was a pause. Then the world began to move simultaneously in slow motion and at warp speed. The first thought I had was that this must be a joke—a horrible, sick joke. Phong had told his brother about what had gone down between us and this was his way of messing with me. This wasn’t real. Phong was sixteen. He couldn’t die. Death was for the old and the sick. This had to be a joke.

Or maybe I hadn’t heard what Paul said correctly. My bad hearing had caused disastrous problems in the past; maybe this was another one of those times. Surely Paul had said something else, something less final. Maybe Phong was sick? In the hospital? It had to be something along those lines. Not dead. I must have misheard. So I asked Paul to repeat himself.

Paul’s voice was flat as he looked me directly in the eyes and said the words I had never, ever wanted to hear.

“Phong killed himself.”


It took my mind less than a second to process, and then I could think nothing else. The words were a mantra in my head, and suddenly there was a gaping hole in my chest and I couldn’t breathe. I doubled over, tears blinding me as I gasped for air. Hands were there, pulling me out of the public eye into the supply closet again. Lisa was crouched on the floor beside me, holding me, crying. My boss, Joanne, suddenly there as well, talking above us. Asking questions. Explaining how Phong had left me, not the other way around. “I want to rip her heart out,” Paul said Phong had disclosed.

No need. My heart was already gone, washed away in the endless flood of tears, or maybe it was all too present. Maybe that was what was hurting me so badly. But I couldn’t just cry here helplessly; I had to ask. It took me a while to find my words again. “How?”

“Jumped in front of a…train.” Paul’s voice broke as he said the last word, and with that I was gone again, swept under the tide of grief.

***

Phong and I had been very open with each other, so I had known Phong was seriously depressed and had been considering his own death for a long time. He was not happy with his life or anything about himself. He told me countless times that I was the only reason he had for living. In February of 2009, on what was the most frightening night of my life, I had to literally talk him out of committing suicide. I’d naïvely thought it was over then: he had promised to never leave me, and I had made it clear that killing himself would be a very efficient way of leaving me.

He was a Christian, but a very new one, so he hadn’t yet had a strong enough connection to God to keep him going. He had hated himself and his life for so long, been in pain for so long, that it was impossible for him to release the hurt into God’s hands. He was tired of being alive. And no matter what I did, one person could not be enough forever. I saved him once, yes. And it kept him with me for three more weeks. Just three weeks.

***

The morning after Phong’s death, there was a story about it in the paper. My mom had laid it out on the dining room table so I was drawn to read it when I woke up.
SEPTA Transit Police told The Temple News that the believed-to-be Asian male, whose name has not been released, was a student at Philadelphia Military Academy at Elverson and had jumped in front of the southbound train just before noon...

Classmates from PMAE, which is located on 13th Street between Diamond Street and Susquehanna Avenue, said the victim was typically smiling but had been seen crying today in school.

“He was cool, laid-back, usually no apparent problems,” said Rahkim Summers, a junior at PMAE. “He even got good grades.” Sources close to the victim reported that his girlfriend, who does not attend PMA, had recently broken up with him.

“I didn’t know his girlfriend personally, but I always saw them together at the mall,” said Shenika Walker, a sophomore at PMAE. “They always seemed happy.

“He was always happy and smiling and showed no signs of being depressed or anything,” Walker said. “This still hasn’t hit me yet – it hasn’t hit any of us.” (Zankey)

When I came to the middle of the piece, I ran to the bathroom and threw up. It was weeks before I was able to finish reading the article.

***

Phong’s classmates and the writer of the article had gotten so many things wrong. I hadn’t been the one to do the breaking up. He had more problems than anyone could imagine. It was almost laughable to say he’d been a good student; I had never known him to do his homework. He was a C and D student.

And he wasn’t always happy. But one thing I was sure of: he had been crying that day instead of smiling. Because I, in an attempt to bring myself some of the closure I so desperately craved after the break-up, had sent him a text that morning, just an hour before it happened. A text full of scalding words and pain. I’d thought he didn’t care about me anymore. He was with someone else. Why would what I had to say to him make a difference?

Maybe he was on the verge of killing himself already, maybe I was just an added factor that helped him make the decision. But then… even if it wasn’t totally my fault… I believed I had pushed him over the edge.

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Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce once said, “In its first stage, grief is madness or something akin to madness” (18). I experienced the madness of grief most powerfully in that first week after Phong’s death. I didn’t know the right way to react emotionally to anything that happened around me; I was completely and utterly lost inside my own heart and mind. Life was blurring by and I was unable to keep up. Madness.

My friends were there for me every hour of every day, the first week. I had no desire to eat or sleep, so they took it upon themselves to make sure I did both regularly. I did what they told me when they told me, but I didn’t much care. I didn’t care about anything.

On Friday, the day of the viewing, I went outside for the first time since Phong had died. I was surrounded by people who had known us both, but I could hardly tell who I was hugging beyond the haze
of grief that covered my eyes. I didn’t care about what words of condolence they were saying. It was all the same. And I had other things commanding my attention here.

I was seeing his body for the first time since it had been breathing.

The body didn’t look like Phong at all. The face looked like it was made of plastic or wax, the wrong shape. I couldn’t even bear to look at it; I knew the reason it looked so different was because he had been so badly damaged by the train. It made it a little easier, in a way. It was just an empty shell in that casket, so technically it wasn’t Phong. Not him, and the alien face sleeping there helped concrete that thought.

The hands were gloved and neatly folded on the chest. It hurt to look at those gloved hands. Hands I had held so often, been touched by, hands I had always been so fascinated by artistically and had loved so very much. I wondered what they looked like now, those piano thin fingers, the bony knuckles. What they looked like under those gloves. I again wanted to throw up.

The thing that made him Phong may not have been there anymore, but that body was just as real, just as much Phong as the soul. The body had had that smile. And now the body was inanimate. Broken. Lifeless.

I couldn’t stop the tears. My grandma had died in early January, and when Phong had heard it was happening, he had dropped everything to come to my house and hold me while I cried. He had helped me heal so much more quickly than I would have had he not been there. But now he was the one I was mourning, and there was no one able to dry my eyes, to make me smile again.

I cried. I went up to the casket and watched helplessly while his best friend fell to his knees by his side and prayed and wept. I sat with my friends as Phong’s mother, a woman he had felt never truly loved him, never truly cared about him, a woman he had at times claimed to hate, completely fell apart. “His birthday is in three weeks,” she kept saying. “I was going to surprise him and get him a better bed like he wanted. I was going to surprise him.” Those were the only words I heard her speak, in English anyway; the rest of the time, she was either crying, or yelling at Phong’s corpse in Vietnamese.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have been waiting to ‘surprise’ him,” I wanted to say to her. “Maybe you should have done more when he was actually alive. Do you realize how little he thought you cared? Now is too late to say how much you loved your son.”

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The night of his sixteenth birthday was supposed to be a night for celebration. Instead, his mother had further and further delayed plans before canceling them altogether. Phong called me in tears asking if he could come to my house and be with me for just a short while. He was sitting on my porch less than ten minutes later.

He ranted about how his mother was never there for him to begin with, but then, on a special day, had promised him something only to completely let him down. He angrily called her a “pathetic excuse for a mother” and raged against her for some time. How she didn’t care about him at all. How he hated her. Then: “Maybe if I had parents that actually cared, I wouldn’t be such a screw-up,” he said bitterly, before breaking down and crying wordlessly in my arms.

I had known him for over a year and a half by then. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry.

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The service was the day after the viewing. My friend Jenn came all the way from her home in New Jersey to be with me for it, which was good, because it was almost as bad as the viewing had been.

The drawing I had done of Phong so long ago was on the front of the program. The good old days. I stared down at the program in my lap as people around me sang a few hymns, listened to a few Bible verses. His brother Paul gave a eulogy, one phrase of which stuck with me: “Phong is, not was.” I attempted to speak after him and a few others, fighting tears the entire time. I talked about how much Phong had cared about others and their happiness before his own. “He’s doing better right now than he ever was here. He’s happy. And he doesn’t want any of us to be sad,” I said, as coherence began to leave me and tears began falling from my eyes against my will. I wasn’t able to get much farther than that.

And then it was over, and I was in a car, and we were burying him, and oh the irony of throwing flowers onto the coffin of a boy who had always hated the idea of giving people flowers. “They die so quickly,” he had complained once. “If I’m trying to show a girl I love her, I’m not going to give her flowers to symbolize that. ‘My love for you is like these flowers, beautiful and just a few days away from dying.’ No way.”

How ironic this rose in my hand was. I felt that if I could remember how to smile I would laugh at that. And suddenly I felt like laughing. Just letting loose some loud, hysterical laughter. I would have sounded mad to those around me, but I didn’t care. There was nothing funny about what was happening, yet somehow it all seemed so hilarious.

*If Phong were here, he’d think the flowers were funny. He’d laugh.*

A mere thought, and in an instant the madness was gone and I was weeping instead of laughing. Roses fell into the hole where now lay the body of my best friend and I cried. I felt as though I was made of these salty tears, and if I cried enough my body would become nothing more than a puddle of water, and then I could escape this life and this pain, just flow away, away, away.

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Since Phong’s death, I’ve had to talk three close friends out of committing suicide. I live in a constant fear that someday I will lose someone else I love to that same monster. It’s a fact that an average of 5,000 teenagers commit suicide in America every year. That is a big number—but that’s what it is, a number. It reduces these lives to a statistic, when in fact they are precious lives, at the very beginning of life, being lost. I know these people. They are not numbers. Phong Ho was not a number.

It is taking a very long time to forgive myself for the things I said and wrote to Phong that night and that morning. After dozens of conversations on the subject, my friend Jenn eventually got tired of my convictions of guilt and told me her theory about Phong’s death. “He’d probably been planning to do it for a long time, Trish,” she said. “I think he pushed you away because he knew you would try to stop him. He still loved you. He just finally decided he couldn’t do it anymore. If what you said did affect him, it only made it happen a little earlier than he was planning. It was already going to happen. When you get like that it’s like you’re wearing blinders. He wasn’t thinking right.

“I hate him for what he did to you,” she added.

Hatred is the last thing on my mind. I feel anger, sometimes, that he ended everything the way he did. Sadness. Pain. Regret. But never hate.
I am in a class right now that is teaching me how to draw portraits of people. Sometimes I look at the portrait I drew of Phong, so long ago, and I’m angry with myself for doing such a comparatively poor job of it. I could do so much better now, I say to myself. Then I realize I will never have a chance to do better, because the subject of the portrait is long since gone. This realization is painful.

So much has been lost; so much has been broken. I still wish sometimes that I had known, that I had seen the signs, which I had realized, that I had done more to help him. I don’t know if I will ever stop wishing. It is said that time heals all wounds, but no one ever mentioned how incredibly slow a healer time is. I still cry, and I still hurt. Maybe the sadness will never be completely gone; but I cling to the hope that someday I will be truly happy again. Maybe even fall in love again.

Someday. But until then, all I can do is look at my photographs, at my drawing, at my letters, and remember.

That wonderful smile.

Works Cited


Soft, Silver Locks

My grandmother’s hair was once soft and stylish—vibrant and lovely; it, like she, was full of all the vivacity and richness of life. But then, when I was a junior in high school, my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. I watched a transformation. As cancer and chemotherapy treatments fought in her body, her hair thinned, fell out. Hair is one’s glory, one’s dignity. Throughout history a shaved head has been a stigma of shame or a sign of conformity. In Biblical times captives’ heads were shaved. Prisoners have shaved heads, people in the military have shaved heads, holocaust victims had shaved heads—cancer patients have shaved heads; a stark sign that often signifies that they have been thrust into a line of people like them, marching toward death.

I always admired my grandmother’s hair. It was silver and curled back elegantly, like a crown on her head. She got it styled in a bouffant at her hairdresser’s every week. I marveled at how there was never a hair out of place and how when she napped or slept, she would emerge seconds later with her hair showing no evidence of pressure of pillow, or static of blanket, or signs of tousling from getting dressed. Her hairstyle was elegance itself, teased into high waves that curled back proudly from her gentle countenance. Some people said my grandmother had beautiful salt-and-pepper hair, but to me this sounded too silly and too simple to describe the variety of luminescent silver sheens that framed her round cheeks and hazel eyes.

At Christmastime my grandmother’s silver hair sparkled, competing with the tinsel strewn on the branches of the tree in splendor. My grandmother loved sparkly things, shiny things; this love was a part of who she was. She always lit candles around the house that emitted a warm welcoming aroma and glow. She was always ready to get into the holiday spirit, and my grandfather would joke that she was Mrs. Claus. Exquisite ornaments and Christmas lights were put up shortly after Thanksgiving. She loved gold jewelry and gaudy jewelry alike, and she would proudly show us the rings and necklaces and pins that she earned from her Mary Kay sales. Sparkling and heavy pieces of jewelry that would have looked ridiculous on me seemed to be made just for her. Like her hair, her modest makeup, the way she managed clients, and the way she decorated and managed her home all spoke of the sophisticated talented artist who put loving care into everything she did.

I still remember the day vividly; I was about thirteen years old at the time and enjoying a visit at my grandparents’ house. My grandmother motioned my sister Laura and me into her bedroom and pulled out a box. She opened it, slowly, gently; with a sacred air she pulled back the lid. Two shiny brown braids lay side by side in the box. They had been cut off in her girlhood. I looked at my grandmother’s sparkling eyes peering at the braids from her gently wrinkled face; she touched the braids gently with her soft wrinkled fingers—to think tiny young delicate fingers had braided them. Chestnut brown with a hint of red, it contrasted beautifully against the stark white of the box. Then, she closed the lid and slipped it back into her dresser drawer. I tried to imagine my grandmother as a little girl with braided hair. The braids seemed out of place in the white box, strangely out of context, a part of who she was as a child immortalized.

It wasn’t too hard for me to imagine my grandmother as a little girl with braids, though. There was a picture, sepia, yellowed with age, of my grandmother and her two sisters, all with gingham-patterned dresses and braided hair, sitting on the front steps of the porch of their Pennsylvania farm house. I imagined the little girl in that picture coming alive. Maybe she tossed her braids in defiance as a boy teased her at school. Perhaps she marked out hopscotch on her dirt driveway and played it with her sisters, braids bouncing on the back of her gingham home-made dress as she energetically hops over the
stone and completes her turn. I can imagine her turning and staring defiantly at her sisters Amy and Joanne to see if they can top her performance. I’m sure she found a nook in the farmhouse where she sneak ed off to curl up and read a good mystery, probably Nancy Drew, which I myself often sneaked off to read when I was a girl. When I inherited the Nancy Drew collection, it was like a ceremony; they had been my grandmother’s, my mother had devoured them before me, and now my sister and I could turn their yellowed pages in anticipation. I can imagine my grandmother’s chestnut brown braids tickling the white pages as her hazel eyes anxiously read each line.

I remember looking at the pictures on my grandparents’ nightstands. On my grandmother’s was a smart picture of my grandfather, twenty-two years old, in a suit and tie. Bright eyes stared out from the handsome face with a dashing smile. On my grandfather’s nightstand was a classy picture of my grandmother, with stylish shoulder-length rich brown hair, a young smiling face and laughing hazel eyes. The soft hair framed her face gently, perfectly. Her hair was parted neatly to the side and she had the classic 1940s roll, which curled back from her forehead beautifully. Poise and style and a smile—this was my grandmother.

All too soon, though, like the luster gone from her hair, the strong rich voice tinged with a slight Pennsylvanian accent, the voice of my grandmother, was also stripped of its beauty and familiarity. Her voice became strange and gravelly; often all she could manage was a hoarse whisper, frequently succeeded by rattling coughs. I hated that cough. It stole our laughter and interrupted our conversations. That cough was the first sign, the tip-off that Grandma was not well. Grandma’s illness made me uneasy when it was undiagnosed; it made me angry when it was finally given a name: cancer.

As the chemo progressed, Grandma’s hair thinned and then began to fall out in chunks. My mom would quickly pick up pieces of it off her pillow, trying to get them out of sight before Grandma noticed. My grandmother bore the cancer bravely, though; she never complained. She still sat up tall and commanding, except when she was hunched over coughing, bald head bent with no hair to hide or soften the force with which the coughs shook her body.

With the passage of time, the chemo became more aggressive. Grandma lost weight rapidly, and the wrinkles on her face became more emphasized. It was an eerie and disheartening transformation. My grandmother had always been a strong woman. She had had a solid frame; round and glowing features and a soft, welcoming presence complemented by a pleasant plumpness that felt so secure and welcoming in a hug. Even in her late seventies, I never thought of her age incapacitating her, as she was still fully functional, capable, strong, independent, mobile and as opinionated as ever. Now, I looked at her, and for the first time I thought—fragile. She had become smaller than me. It seemed as though she had aged ten years in just one year. Now, almost all of her beautiful hair was gone. Once, when I saw her bald head, I almost giggled, because with her wide grin, she reminded me of Dopey on Snow White. Yet I stifled the laughter, keenly aware that the circumstances were far from funny.

My grandmother was courageous. She showed no self-consciousness. In fact, she would ask my sister and me which wig she should wear. She let us try them on and laughed as we put on hairstyles made for women sixty years our senior. One of the wigs made Grandma look a bit like her old self, except it lacked the healthy silver sheen of her real hair. I could almost imagine that she was well and everything was normal.

A few months later, though, Grandma confessed that the wigs were too itchy and irritating; she began to wrap scarves around her head instead. My grandmother took joy in showing us her collection of silky scarves: multi-colored scarves with busy floral patterns, pastel plain-colored scarves, ornate scarves from other countries with golden threads outlining roses. She would show them off excitedly, telling me who gave her each one. After explaining the scarves’ origins she asked us which one she should wear that day. My sister and I picked a scarf that we thought was pretty. On the outside, I was smiling and handin
her the colorful scarf, but on the inside I was reluctant to see her put it on. Not only did the scarves fail to
hide her baldness, but their bright colors only intensified her pale grayish face. She was my grandmother,
but her physical suffering, combined with the peculiarity of the visual transformation made complete by
the scarf tied tightly around her round head, made her strangely unfamiliar. The scarf reminded me of
something someone stripped of dignity might wear—a wash woman’s attire, not my grandmother’s. With
her tired face and colorful scarf and heavy gold hoops in her ears, by strange fancy, my grandmother
reminded me of a gypsy. But my grandmother wasn’t a beggar; she was, as she had always been, a giver.

I remember my grandmother’s silver crowned head bobbing up and down as my sister and I held
up each item for her approval as we packed boxes and bags at the food pantry. Grandma had been a
volunteer for CHOW, an organization whose goal was to provide food for the hungry, as long as I could
remember. There was a quota of what must be in each bag, but she was always encouraging us to throw in
extra things that the families might enjoy. Grandma thrived on helping others; she loved serving,
volunteering, and fellowshipping.

I knew Grandma was really sick when she stopped going to get her hair styled. She cancelled her
appointments, appointments that had been a part of her routine for decades. I’d once gone with my
Grandma to see her get her hair styled. I remember being a bit disappointed to find out that her hair didn’t
grow in those perfectly formed waves naturally. This time she let me get something done to my hair too.
Grandma understood my attachment to my hair. She warned her hair stylist not to cut my hair too short
because I could style it so prettily when it was long and she described to her my knack for braiding it and
making natural headbands with it. I proceeded to ask the hairstylist to cut me wispy stylish bangs, even
having brought a picture of Hilary Duff as an example. However, she ended up cutting me three-year-old
triangle bangs. (Yes, triangle bangs, the ones that go with bowl cuts for toddlers, thick bangs that are
blunt, cut straight across your forehead and that start at about the middle of one’s head!) I tried to
rationalize away how bad they were and didn’t let Grandma know I was disappointed. Luckily, she only
trimmed the rest of my hair and actually understood the difference between the words trim and cut. On
the car ride home I ran my fingers through the soft, fine, silky, fresh cut ends of my hair. The sun caught
it, and as the strands lit up like strands of gold, I watched the metallic golden hue dance as I bent the
strands back and forth. I smiled as I remembered my father’s nickname for me, “Goldilocks.” I wondered
if when I got old my hair would change to silver also. Then aging wouldn’t be so terrible, I thought.

“A gray head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness” (Prov. 16.31). I
remember how her gray head bent over tax forms and check book registers as she worked with her taxes
for her clients; her head bent over Christmas gifts and wrapping paper; her head bent over a mixer as
mashed potatoes are lovingly made; or her head cocked sideways as she pulls a roast, rolls, or her
delicious pies from the oven. Her gray hair represented wisdom. Wisdom, her life was full of it: the
wisdom that hard work was valuable, wisdom on how to invest oneself in the lives of others, wisdom that
giving was better than receiving, and wisdom that using one’s talents to serve others was the best use of
them. She reminded me of the Proverbs 31 woman: “She extends her hands to the poor” (Prov. 31.20).
My grandmother took refugee children under her wing. She brought them to church and took them to her
home for meals sometimes. She delivered candy to their house on Easter and gifts at Christmas. We went
to thrift stores and looked for beds and mattresses to furnish their tiny apartment. She put pictures of them
on her fridge, beside those of her own grandchildren. She lovingly embraced a tall, slender young girl at
her church, embodying mother and grandmother for this girl, who was being raised by a single father. My
sisters and I were young and didn’t have much to give others, but we learned to share our grandmother.

I also knew Grandma was really ill when the bridge groups she and my grandfather regularly
hosted moved to other houses, when she was too tired to play a game with my siblings and me, and
especially when she could no longer go to church. I missed Grandma standing beside me at First Baptist
Church, Endicott in her colorful, distinguished, Alfred Dunner pant suits. Her hair always continued the
sophisticated elegance of her outfit. Her regal hair included bangs swept to one side that brought out her
eyes. I missed how during prayer request and praise time, when the microphone was passed around the aisles, without fail my grandmother would stand up proudly and announce, “I’m so thankful for my daughter Marene and her husband Jim, and my grandchildren who came to visit.” I can still remember her strong alto voice with a slight twang of an accent belting out, “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses.” I would glance sideways at her. She didn’t even need to look at the hymnal; she knew the words by heart. I would look back at the scramble of notes and words and try to sing the melody and not sing the wrong verses. For me, unlike her, it was quite a demanding task. I was distracted by the sunbeams, which were transformed into soft colors that played on the people and the church floor and the pews as they came through the tall, narrow stained glass windows. In any case, we would soon flip the hymnal to another entry. Again I would scramble awkwardly, trying not to drop the hymnal and yet frantically trying to find the page before the first verse had begun. How did Grandma find the page so quickly? I wondered. She diligently, quietly turned to the correct page, even though she didn’t need to see the words. She then smiled and sang with extra gusto, “When I die, hallelujah by and by . . . I’ll fly away.”

Even now, I fondly remember times when Grandma was stronger. I remember the Fourth of July get together. My grandmother carried things for the picnic down the steep cement staircase and placed them on the picnic table. Her hair was like a rolling gray sea with the sun sparkling on the crests of the waves. We grandchildren had often waited outside until this moment. We looked forward to the usual treats, Grandma’s deviled eggs and potato salad and grandpa’s grilled spiedies. Grandma held onto the cement railing to help her balance the fruit salad she was carrying on her hip, as she made her way down the steps. Little did we know that soon her body would be weakened by cancer and she would use a cane to walk, then a walker; and finally would be bedridden, lying on a hospital bed in her own home.

Sometime in November 2006 it was decided that my grandmother would stop receiving chemo treatments. Part of me was glad that the treatments were stopping. I hated watching Grandma suffer. The treatments totally incapacitated her, exhausting her and taking away her appetite for days. She hardly ate anything; swallowing was a burden. I missed my grandmother who ate three hearty meals a day, savored every bite, and always had room for dessert. Now Grandma could hardly keep anything down. She often winced and tossed and turned uncomfortably when she tried to rest. As much as I was relieved that the chemo that so exhausted my grandmother was stopping, I also knew that the end of the treatments had a deeper, darker meaning.

Nonetheless, our family’s Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations were held at Grandma’s house, like always. With the cessation of the chemo treatments her hair began to come in again, slowly. At Thanksgiving time it looked something between peach fuzz and an awkwardly short buzz cut. Grandma seemed to be regaining some of her strength. All the aunts and older granddaughters worked busily in the kitchen to prepare the feasts. As I cut onions and other vegetables for the salad and later when I had to help wash the endless dishes I wished that Grandma was her healthy, energetic self again, everything fresh and right, right up to her rich voice and the last hair in place, and that I would hear her shooing us grandchildren from the kitchen while she and my mother and aunts did their culinary magic.

While Christmas did not provide Grandma with a miracle, being able to have Christmas with her was a blessing to all of us. Before Christmas we visited and we helped her more than usual with the setup of the decorations and lights, the tree, and the nativity. I thought there would be many less presents this year, but somehow Grandma had managed to buy and wrap so many gifts that we needed the regular entourage of grandchildren to carry them from the back room to put them under the tree. Aunts and uncles and grandchildren pulled together to make Christmas like she would have had she had the strength. We set out the Christmas tins and trays and filled them with nuts and an array of chocolates, chocolate-covered pretzels, and assortments of Christmas cookies. By Christmas, Grandma’s hair was filling in naturally, although still a bit short. Grandma actually walked some with her walker. She played half a game of cards with us. She mustered energy to use her walker and get to the table for meals, even if she
didn’t eat very much. When it was time to open presents she directed who should open what present and when from her throne on the couch and her new grown hair, fine, like that of a newborn, shone in the lamplight like corn silk in the sun.

Like the silver sheen coming back to her hair, I saw a glimmer of hope in those holiday moments we shared. Grandma smiled and laughed, though her laughter was often interrupted by those unsettling coughs. Between meals she would lay in the back room and sleep. I felt like I was getting pieces of Grandma back, and, like the 1000-piece-puzzles we used to put together, I felt as if I had found some of the missing pieces and might be able to make the picture complete again. But the shadow of reality soon fell on my ray of hope. My parents, and uncles and aunts would whisper quietly to one another. They would speak in hushed tones of how my grandmother was just trying to make it through the holidays and how they ought to watch her closely and visit more frequently because her “time” was soon.

As the New Year began Grandma’s health faded quickly. Throughout January my mother took off from work and made weekend trips to visit her mom frequently, and each time came back more worried than before. She took us up to visit her, and explained to us the changes in her condition that she’d noticed so that we wouldn’t be shocked. When we arrived we found out that Grandma hadn’t eaten hardly anything for days. I made her a strawberry-banana smoothie and watched as she lifted her head up to sip some of it, conscientious of my worry over her lack of appetite. With my mom holding the cup and the straw, my Grandma managed to swallow a couple mouthfuls before her head, heavy with exhaustion, flattened her silver hair on the pillow again and the hospital bed creaked. My grandma smiled at me weakly and whispered, “Thank you.”

H-O-S-P-I-C-E. These bold, black letters against a glaring yellow, a sticker with the telephone number printed beneath it. One of these stickers was stuck on the telephone in my grandparents’ kitchen, and another was crudely stuck on the phone in the living room. I hated those stickers, and I hated the word, HOSPICE. It was strange and cold. To me, it was a combination of the words “hospital” and “ice.” Little rainbows danced on the wall next to the neon sticker; their softness a strange contrast to the harsh yellow and the reality it brought to mind.

In my grandmother’s kitchen a tiny chandelier of crystals hangs in the window above the sink. At sunrise and sunset they cast hundreds of little rainbows on the walls and ceiling. I remember when I was a child trying to catch them in my hand and wondering at how they always were on top of my hand and evaded my grasp. That prism was like my grandmother, she scattered light and joy and beauty wherever she went. I realized like the rainbow I could never catch, I couldn’t hold onto my grandmother, but I could enjoy the beauty of the thousands of colorful memories I find scattered about my heart.

The house was quiet, too quiet. Everyone talked in hushed voices. Low voices came from the back room. My Mom, her brother Ron, and her sister Noli all took turns reading to Grandma: the Bible, various novels, and Reader’s Digest®. I remember my mother reading for hours, to the point where she would begin to lose her voice. My Uncle Ron, Aunt Noli, and my mother also took turns sleeping in the room across the hall or by her door so that they could be with her if she cried out in pain or needed something in the night. Grandpa would kneel by her bed and pray for hours.

My grandmother lay tired on her hospital bed in the back room. My Uncle Ron stroked her hair gently, lovingly, whispering, “Mom, your hair’s growing back in; your beautiful hair is growing back in. It’s getting longer. Your hair’s so pretty. I love your hair, Mom. You’re so beautiful, Mom.”

My grandmother came to my plays, my concerts, the ceremonies that marked my life. She was there at my sixth grade graduation. She and Grandpa sat in the audience and saw their little actress as Helen in Helen Keller, as Susan in The Life and Death of Larry Benson, and as Mother Abbess in The Sound of Music. She came to see me sing in a traveling ministry chorus called Revelation and Reflections.
I always imagined that I would see her gray shimmery head in the audience at my twelfth grade graduation; I never imagined that she wouldn’t be there to look on with proud eyes as I graduated from college. I thought she would be seated in the front row at my wedding, that I would be able to introduce my children to their great grandmother. Instead I sat in the chairs at her funeral and I cast roses on her casket and watched the gently falling flakes of snow fall on the black glistening surface of her casket.

In that moment as I watched the white, intricate snowflakes landing on the coffin and melting intermittently, I realized how fleeting is the beauty of life. Each of us is given but a short moment of life before we too fade into the blackness of death. It was February 14, 2007, Valentine’s Day. On a day so many celebrate a life of love beginning we were celebrating a life of love that had ended, but whose legacy was far from ending. We hold onto snippets of memory, and the images that make those memories come alive, like beautiful hair.

Now, four years after my grandmother’s death, my mom’s hair is turning a lovely silver; it is soft and fine like my grandmother’s, and I know that she will continue to impart the wealth of wisdom she’s inherited for many years to come. Wisdom is a priceless inheritance. My Grandma taught me many things. She taught me to guard my heart with thanks. She taught me to spend my life by loving, to spend my talents in serving, and to spend my resources by giving. She taught me to invest in human hearts, an investment that will never be fully lost.

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**Amazing Grace**

Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;
'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.
—John Newton, “Amazing Grace” (qtd. in Lionel)

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“Has she had any more hallucinations?” my mom asked over the phone as she checked in with me for the umpteenth time that day.

“No; she is doing alright so far.”

“Well, your dad took all the knives and other weapons out of the house, so she shouldn’t have anything to come at you with again.”

My heart skipped a beat as I was reminded of the events of the previous week. My sister had been prescribed a new medicine that caused her to hallucinate and made her emotions nearly uncontrollable. We were out of milk so I snuck out while she was napping to walk down to the little corner market to pick up a carton of it along with a few other basic necessities. When I returned from the store, groceries in tow, I fumbled with my key a little because my hands were full and struggled noisily into the one-bedroom basement apartment. I had left a note for Kate on the fridge but she obviously hadn’t seen it. Before I could even set my bags down I heard her scream.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here? Get out of my apartment!”

I dropped my packages, completely startled and in shock. Before I could answer her, she was rushing toward me wielding a kitchen knife, wild-eyed and still bellowing at me to get out of her apartment. It wasn’t the first time she had fallen into a fit of rage due to the side effects of her medication. I caught her as soon she got within reach and held tightly to the hand with the knife in it until she calmed down and her memory of me returned. She had lost a lot of weight from her disease and was very weak, so controlling her body for her in this way was not a physically draining task. However, holding my big sister, who was once a strong, independent woman, I felt some of the most emotional strain I have ever felt in my life. A junior in college, my 5’10” sister weighed barely 110 pounds and was dependent on me, her 14-year-old sister. I felt my heart wrench in my chest that day as I struggled to bite back tears and stroked her hair cooing, “It’s okay, Kate. It’s just me. Everything is fine.”

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When I was in ninth grade my sister Kate was diagnosed with Chronic Paroxysmal Hemicrania (CPH), a disease that attacks the brain and causes its victims to undergo episodes of extreme migraine headaches, intense nausea, and seizures (Louro). The disease is incredibly rare and seems to be more prevalent in females (Singh). CPH is usually brought on by exposure to a certain bacteria at a time when the body’s immune system is in a weak state. At the time she was diagnosed, Kate was only one out of twenty people suffering from CPH in the entire nation (Ezdebski). At first, the doctors had no idea what was wrong with her and experimented with several medications to treat her symptoms but could not help to determine what was causing them. Most doctors wrote her off as a psychiatric case and said that there was not much that could be done for her.

When I heard that Kate was really ill and that she needed to have someone stay with her, I immediately volunteered myself. I had no idea what I was getting myself into and just thought it would be a good way to get out of the house for the summer. I was tired of the same old routine and needed a change so, though my sister and I were not very close (to say the least), I made the decision to move in with her and care for her. I am not sure why I wanted to get out of the house badly enough to move in
with the person who, during my childhood, I referred to as my Mortal Enemy but, for some reason, getting away was imperative. I wanted it so much that I was willing to move in with Kate, a person that I would have best described as snotty, controlling, spoiled, and just plain mean. I was willing to move in with the person who had called me “Eraser Butt” for most of my preteen years, hurting my feelings and embarrassing me on a daily basis. I was willing to jump in the car, no pushing or pleading needed, and oblige my parents as “care-giver to the witch.” Little did I know that my choice to move in with Kate would change my life, and the way I looked at her, forever.

Undiagnosed and with medicines that barely treated her symptoms, Kate was a wreck. The nights were the most difficult for both of us. She would wake up often and need to vomit, or just need to use the restroom, but she was weak from her illness and could barely walk. I would let her use me as support and would help her to the bathroom where I would hold back her hair so she could vomit and then help wash her face and hands. She would brush her teeth and then I would walk her back to bed. Usually this routine occurred about four times a night, and I never woke up in the morning feeling like I had gotten any rest at all. I would lie awake next to her, instinctively knowing that she would be nudging me soon to take her again. Her basement apartment was always near frigid, even in the summer, and since she was a poor, college student she had little money to pay for heating and even less money with all her medical bills. She often pressed her ice-like toes against my skin under the covers to warm them and I didn’t have the heart to tell her to stop. I would listen to her shallow breaths and wonder how someone could ever get better from being this sick. It terrified me and I often had nightmares of waking up next to my sister’s limp, lifeless body.

The days were not much better. Kate would fall into seizures at least four times a day, usually preceded by an intense migraine headache or an ache in the back of her neck. Unable to do much to take care of her when she had a seizure, I would simply try to hold her still and keep her from hitting her body off something or hurting herself in some way. She usually passed out or slipped in and out of consciousness. I remember standing with her talking one moment and the next moment, seeing her eyes start to flutter and catching her frail body as she tumbled to the floor in violent convulsions. Her seizures would last anywhere from twenty seconds to two minutes and would usually come in small clusters, three or four seizures, one right after the other. She would always feel nauseous immediately after, and I would have to struggle to get her to her feet and to the bathroom on time. As she rarely made it, I would often need to change my clothes and scrub the vomit smell from my hands. At first, I remember being so repulsed that I could hardly keep from vomiting myself, but as the days went on and the cycle continued, it became just another part of life. I grew accustomed to what I once considered the grotesque.

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“I don’t know why I am telling you all this, Rach.” My sister was sitting on the couch in her living room, bundled in the comforter from her bed, sipping hot chocolate while tears streamed down her face. “I mean, I know we never really have talked like this before. I just feel really close to you right now—like you are my only true friend. You gave up your summer to come take care of me and, while I know we have always been…what do you call us? Mortal enemies or whatever?... Anyway, I need a sister right now.”

I smiled over at her from where I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the vomit out of her carpet. She had just confided in me about her current boyfriend Kurt and how she thought he was cheating on her. She was worried he didn’t want her because she was sick. He never came to visit, and her heart broke every day because of it.

“Kate, I think the guy is a jerk! You can do better. Don’t even worry about him. He isn’t worth your time or energy and he is fat and balding. Let that Sheila chick have him.”
“I am so glad we are friends now, Rach. It would be horrible if we went through our entire lives hating each other.”

For the first time, I actually agreed with my sister. We had become friends and it was the best thing that could have happened to me. She may have needed a sister right then, but so did I. It just took me a little while to realize how important sisters, or for that matter, best friends really are. There would be days in the future when I would confide in her with all my “boy problems” and we would laugh and cry for hours. It was in the moment that she chose to open her heart to me that the beauty, depth and complexity of our relationship were born.

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Usually, when Kate had good days, we would snuggle up on her old, worn out, hand-me-down couch that she got from my grandma and watch old movies. Her apartment was always cold, so we would make hot chocolate and wrap in blankets we stole off her bed. Sometimes we would do each other’s nails or hair or just sit and chat, paying only a little attention to the TV. Giggling like little girls, we would share secrets with each other and talk about boys. As I taught her how to make string bracelets, she gave me tips on clothes and make up. My sister would vent about our parents and how she wanted to have her own life away from them and I complained about school and the drama there. We discovered that summer that we had more in common than either of us had ever thought before. Having come to this conclusion, we often joke that we are “the same person but different.” As Toni Morrison once said, “A sister can be seen as someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves - a special kind of double” (“Toni Morrison Quotes”).

As good as those days were they could not outweigh the horrible days that seemed to dominate my sister's life. Days that seemed to drag on and on with no end in sight. Days when I thought I would rather die than try to keep living the way we were. When we had those kinds of hard days, my mom would come over and stay for a few hours so I could relax and sleep a little. She would usually make us sandwiches first and then would send me to bed and care for my sister while I tried in vain to rest.

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“Turkey, ham, roast beef, or tuna?” Mom called to my sister and me from the kitchen. I was getting ready to help my sister walk out from the bedroom to sit on the couch for a bit.

“Turkey, no mayo!” we both called in unison. Astonished, we looked at each other for a moment and then burst into fits of laughter.

“Jynx!” I giggled. My sister was more like me than I had ever before thought.

***

Even my sister’s bad days paled in comparison to one particular horrible day. I don’t remember much about the day itself except that must have been a Friday because my dad was not home. After a particularly traumatic episode, my sister’s headache would not subside. She told me it was only getting worse and that I needed to call my mom and have her come take her to the hospital. My mom only lived twenty minutes away, but those twenty minutes felt like days as my sister screamed in pain in my arms, and I held her helpless until my mom arrived. My mom and I took Kate to a hospital in Scranton, thirty minutes from our house, where she would remain for the next two weeks, in and out of the ICU on the verge of death. The seizures caused the muscles in the back of her neck to constrict, cutting off the blood flow to her brain. She could not stay conscious for very long, and the doctors were concerned about her decreasing brain activity. Kate was experiencing excruciating pain and told my mom it felt like someone was trying to rip out the back of her neck and tear off her head. The doctors told my mom there was
nothing they could do. The odds of my sister pulling through this alive were not good. My sister told my mom it was okay because she was in so much pain that she just wanted to die, but my mom, always a fighter, decided to get a second opinion.

After consulting with another doctor and family friend, my mom chose to have my sister moved to Thomas Jefferson Hospital, where the doctors were neurologists and might possibly be able to diagnose Kate and save her life. I wasn’t sure it would do much good. The doctors told my mom there was nothing that could be done. Since I believed them to be well-educated, masters of medicine, I never consider doubting there diagnosis. In fact, after they told us that there was not much hope for Kate, I started to think that my sister would never be well again and that I would be lucky if she lived to see me graduate high school.

The trip was long and hard on my sister. Thomas Jefferson was about two hours south of Scranton and the ambulance ride was not at all pleasant. It was on that ride, in the back of the ambulance, that I saw my mom cry for the first time in my life as her daughter lay in incredible pain, drifting in and out of consciousness, and she sat helpless by her side. I watched as my mom bowed her head and held my sister’s hand. As the lights of ambulance flashed in the background, and my sister’s stretcher creaked with the sway of the vehicle, my mom’s lips moved in silent prayer. I couldn’t help but think that not even God could make this okay. Nothing would be able to fix things if I lost my sister. Why would God let us become friends just to take her away from me?

At Thomas Jefferson, my sister met Dr. Robbins, who was not only able to diagnose her correctly but also get her into a stable condition through proper medication. He determined that she was a victim of CPH and that she must have come into contact with the bacteria that cause the disease somehow while she was at college. He went on to explain that her body must have been in a severely weakened state and that this helped the bacteria to get in and cause this much damage. My sister confirmed this by admitting to having both pneumonia and bronchitis a few weeks before she started having her episodes. Dr. Robbins prescribed Indomethacin to treat her disease and it turned out to be completely successful in alleviating my sister’s symptoms. He saved my sister’s life and helped to send the disease into remission. I know it was only through the grace of God that Kate was able to win her battle against CPH. There is no way she should have survived, especially that one horrible night. People who hear her story say she was “so lucky,” but if you ask my sister what she thinks about it, I can guarantee “luck” is not the word she would use. God let his grace wash over her, wrapped her in the palm of his hand and carried her through her struggle. The words of John Newton’s song, “Amazing Grace,” took on a whole new meaning for my sister. Her and I both developed a deep appreciation for what it means to be “saved by the grace of God.”

***

While that summer holds some of my most nightmarish memories, it holds some of my favorite ones as well. For example, one day when Kate was feeling exceptionally well, all things considered, we decided to go for a walk at Keystone College, just a few blocks away. As we strolled through the nearly deserted campus, we came across a group of guys tossing around a football.

“Oh, he is cute!” Kate whispered to me indicating with her head to a tall, dark haired, burly looking boy in a cherry red t-shirt and cargo shorts.

“No way, that one is way hotter!” I stated emphatically as I directed her gaze to a blonde, shirtless boy in athletic shorts that appeared to be playing quarterback.

“You only like him for those abs.”

“So what?” I replied. “He is still gorgeous!”
“Hey!” my sister called out, “my little sister thinks you are hot!” To my dismay and embarrassment, not only did the blonde boy hear her but he proceeded to jog over and introduce himself and was about to leave his number with me when my sister told him I was only 14.

“Darn,” he stated flatly, “I don’t get called to by pretty girls that often. I was thinking it was fate.” He winked at me flirtatiously and jogged away. I couldn’t stop blushing the entire way home as Kate and I giggled and giggled about what had just happened. We replayed the entire conversation, imitating each other and the boy and then laughing hysterically as if it were the funniest thing in the world. I will never forget that day and how, as she yelled to the boy, I loved and hated her all at the same time.

***

My sister now lives a happy and healthy life though she has to be very careful to take good care of her body in order to keep the disease from returning. The tragedy that brought us together laid the groundwork for a beautiful friendship. Still, remembering that tragedy is not easy and is unavoidable. The nightmares are ever present. I see my sister gasping for breath, body trembling, eyes rolling back in their sockets as the seizure consumes her entire being. The next night it will be me in peril as she chases me with the kitchen knife grasped in her tightly clenched fist and no matter how fast or hard I think I am running, I can never get away and feel as if I am barely moving. Or perhaps I am seated at the side of her stark white hospital bed which only serves to make her pale skin even more sallow. Kate’s eyes flutter for a moment and I hear her breathing slow. Soon I am well aware that her grip on my hand is slackening and I try to scream for a nurse but no words come out of my mouth. I watch as she flat lines, helpless, a victim of my own imagination.

Though I have come to accept these nightmares as a part of my life, and have become accustomed to waking up in a cold sweat with the intense desire to call my sister to see that she is alive and well, it does not make them any more bearable. They are the remaining scars, the embodiment of everything I wish I could forget, flaunting themselves boldly at every corner of my imagination when I slumber. However, looking back and focusing on the good times Kate and I spent together during the summer she was ill help me to cope and restore some sense of balance to my life. I am sure I cannot be the only person in my family who still struggles with the grotesque and painful memories of what my sister went through, even though no one else will talk about it. The rest of my family tries to do what I cannot do anymore—suppress that which can never be fully suppressed. I know I may never fully recover from my experiences with Kate last summer but I also know that if it were not for the difficulties that we faced together, we would not be best friends today. God used the hard times to bring us together. His grace was sufficient to save my sister from the clutches of death and by his grace she continues to grow stronger each day.

***

The other day I went to visit Kate and her husband in their new home. Her newborn son was taking a nap and Kate and I seized the moment to curl up on her new furniture and watch an old movie. As we started the film, I glanced over at my sister. “Want to do our nails?” I asked, a glimmer of nostalgia dancing across my eyes.

“Let’s,” she replied, “but first I need to go get us some hot chocolate.”
Works Cited

Ezdebski, Kate. Phone interview. 6 Oct. 2010.


The scene begins on a Saturday, and I have no school. I should be using the time for things that I can only do on a Saturday: playing video games, riding my bike with friends, reading a non-assigned book. Instead, I’m sitting on a swing set, alone. Not a lot of kids come to this place, mainly because all the apartments in the complex have their own swings. But, this one is perfect for me. It’s in the center of the complex and I have an all-surrounding view of the area. I can see every car that drives up the road. It doesn’t matter to me if anyone else is at this set. I won’t be staying long, I tell myself.

The problem is that I can’t remember what color car my dad has. It might be blue, I remind myself, or maybe gray. Or does he have a truck? It’s been so long and I don’t know what I should be looking for. Consequently, every car that drives past causes me to sit up with attentiveness, not wanting to miss him. What if I’m not there when he arrives? Will he wait? I’m not certain, so I’m making sure I’m ready.

He said he was coming. I repeat this as if it’s the magic word to cause him to appear, like the summoning of Captain Marvel. I know he said this, though he had told my mom. He never speaks to me directly about coming, as if he doesn’t want to lie to me directly. But that doesn’t matter now; after all, he said he was coming. I push the memory of the forgotten pizza date to the back of my mind, creating a clean slate for my dad.

The often noisy apartment complex is eerily quiet. The only sound I hear is the squeaking swing as I rock back and forth, and my feet dragging in the dirt as I do so. The sky is gray and getting darker, but that’s alright with me. I have no real perception of time. I reassure myself, before night, before it gets dark, he’ll be here and we’ll go out to eat and have a good time.

I get in trouble a lot in school for being too hyper. I’ve had detentions for being all over the place before. That thought makes me laugh as I sit on the swing, waiting intently. The cars continue to pass by, but it’s getting late and the traffic is slowing. How long have I been outside? Maybe hours.

I being to pray, the way only children can, with full trust and fear, with anxiousness and hope. Every car I see in a trick, looking like it’s going to turn into my apartment’s parking lot, but passing by. I close my eyes and pray. God, I’m going back inside and not waiting anymore. If you want me to go with him, you need to have him show up.

I tell God all of this and see the next car drive by, this one a trick as well. I’m serious, God. The next car will be my last. I tell him that after the next car passes. And the next.

The picture fades out.

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We fade into a prior scene and I’m being lectured.

“You shouldn’t tease your sister. It’s not nice.” My mom is in her bed, reading. I’m standing next to her, but I don’t hear a word she says. She’s mad at me for teasing my sister about my coming evening, not just because I love pizza (which I do) but because my dad is taking me out. Making fun of my sister, I’m bragging about going out soon. My sister doesn’t cry but she’s obviously mad, yet mom seems indifferent.
“How would you feel if your dad was taking Aeryn out and not you?”

Another guilt trip. I refuse to listen to anything more; as soon as my mom is done with her lecture, I’m gone. Looking in my room, I’m trying to find something to help the time pass quicker. The problem is I don’t want to take a bunch of things out only to put them all back. I leave my room and look for my brother, Andrew. The phone rings and I stop dead in my tracks. Normally, I don’t care who’s calling, but now I’m hanging on the information. I run to pick up the phone but my mom already has it in her room. Rolling around the hallway, trying to expel the energy and not notice how long my mom is talking, I find patience to be theoretical. If it is my dad, I process, he’s taking a long time to say he’s on his way. Aeryn comes out of her room, still mad at me. My tongue is out to let her know how I feel about her feelings. From her room, I hear my mom calling me and, like lightning, I’m up the stairs in a heartbeat. She doesn’t look happy.

“Eric, he’s not coming. He said maybe another weekend.” She looks sad, like this news hurts her. I stand there for a few seconds and nod, saying it’s okay and leaving. I don’t know where I’m going in the apartment, probably to my room. Maybe I’ll put on my cape and pummel my sister for fun. I know it doesn’t matter if I get in trouble. What’s my mom going to say? I ask myself. That I can’t go with my dad for pizza?

The scene fades away.

***

We fade back into a later day. The car already smells like smoke but he lights a cigarette anyway. I try to hold my breath, competing against myself like kids in a pool. I try to count how long I can go without breathing but I don’t get far. Every time I breathe, I can smell the smoke, even though his window is open. I try to breathe into my sweatshirt, into my arm, but it doesn’t help. I wish he had quit smoking cigarettes for good, like he told us he would, but my father went back to them soon after the divorce. Or maybe he never gave them up in the first place. Maybe he just hid them from us, another lie to keep us from being too much trouble for him.

My sister and brother are in the back seat. I’m upfront, which my dad makes mandatory, because I’m the oldest. He calls me “boy” and tells us that he’s missed us and wishes he could see us more. He says he’s busy. Busy with what? I wonder.

We’re going to meet his new girlfriend, my siblings and I coming along to make him look good, like a new shirt or a well-trimmed haircut. I’m not happy. I’d rather go back home and hang out with my friends than be used. Once we get there, he’s just going to talk to the girl and leave us to play in the area.

Our conversations are on and off, stilted and fluff, instigated and stopped by him. He asks us questions and when we get a little out of control he turns up his radio so loud it hurts my ears. When we get to the school, I’m proven to be a prophet. I wrestle with my brother and my dad talks to a girl ten years younger than him. I hate this. I think, knowing my expectations will never align with reality. I want to go home.

This is the picture as we fade out, once more in both time and from each other.

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The fade is before that day on the swing, and we’re driving back home from my grandmother’s. I didn’t eat as much as she wanted me to, but I’m stuffed. My siblings are in the back and I’m proud to be in the front, my rightful place.

“Someday, I’m going to have a house built for us, you kids and me. You each will have your own rooms.” My dad tells us, his smile holding his cigarette in place. The idea seems like a dream come true. I can’t wait for the day, when I’ll have my own room. He goes on and tells us the day will come when he’s done with school, when he gets that job. Then we’ll live with you every day. You can cook for us and I’ll finally have my own room. I’ll be the oldest and you’ll remind the others of that. The future can’t come soon enough.

As we fade out, we both know that day never comes.

***

The phone is ringing as we fade in. It’s been two years since the phone rang with him on the other end. That’s why I’m taken by surprise to hear his voice, still the same gruff, deep voice that I would never try to argue. We talk for a moment, about school or whatever he thinks he’s supposed to ask about. As soon as the moment passes, he asks for my mother. I quickly give her the phone.

A few days later, he’s over the house and my mother is typing a paper for him. She’s much faster than him on a keyboard, and he’s a hopeless editor (or so she says). He has a big paper due for school and he needs to have it written correctly. The center is around the computer, my dad and mom talking, and us children hoping he asks us a question. I silently beg to him. Any question, please.

My siblings try to interject, to tell their dad about their lives. He humors them for a minute and then tells them to go find something to do. I keep conversation going with my mom, informing her about the book order I picked up in class and asking her if we could buy something this month. My dad, looking at me like he knows me as his son, tells me to stop bothering my mother. I want to scream at you! I rail in my mind, anger burning inside me. To let you know how we all feel about you!

But I don’t say a word. Hoping my dad is gone by the time I get back, I leave to find some friends. Unfortunately, he has more papers to write and he keeps stopping by to have my mom help him. You use us. Every time he calls, every time he’s over, this is all I can think. You call for us only to have Mom help you. If we weren’t here, your job would be easier. I just want him to stop calling, to stop coming over.

Then he finishes school and, as expected, he stops coming over.

I feel the fade this time.

***

The fade in finds us at the amusement park, Canobie Lake. I can’t remember having gone before, though my mom said she had taken me when I was younger. But, as my dad and I walk past the rides, it seems all new to me. The time seems to fly by, like the day is being stolen from me. We’re back at home before I know it. As soon as we pull into the drive, a warning goes off in my head like a smoke alarm, telling me there’s trouble, but not where or of what kind. Something’s wrong. Something is not right. We walk in and he tells my mom goodbye and I realize he’s leaving again. I scream and kick and get sent to my room, my mom, yet again, trying to explain to me the idea of divorce.
My dad looks sad and leaves. There’s no yelling; he doesn’t put up a fight. Don’t go! Don’t go again, please! In a frantic attempt to catch him, I grab three blankets and tie them together the best way I can, not really knowing how to tie anything in a knot. With one end of my blanket-robe tied to the bedpost, I open the window and drop the other end outside. I can still catch him, I tell myself, I can still catch him.

The window is only on the first floor, but the drop is high enough that I second guess myself. I reconfirm my commitment to the plan and climb down, scrapping my leg against the brick. The bushes are over my head and I can’t see the parking lot, so I race out as fast as I can, ready to catch my dad. He’ll take me with him, I desperately tell myself, he’ll take me back to the park. But the lot is empty. There is no car; my dad is gone. I stand for a second and realize that my plan failed and I now have to explain to my mom why I’m outside in the first place. Knocking on the front door, I feel stupid. The door opens and although my mom does a double take when she sees that it’s me, she doesn’t yell at me as I fall into her arms, almost crying. I don’t understand any of this.

The fade out takes us away before the tears finally come.

***

The fade is so sharp it’s almost a cut, sudden and jarring. I’ve been seventeen for a month or so and I’m trying to figure out why my mom brought me to the Harris’. I’m not really bothered, I like them a lot, and I would have wanted to come over anyway. But, my mom is lingering on the couch, like she’s planning to stay. The Harris are sitting as well, just talking, as if they’re trying to direct the conversation to a point of interest, but don’t know how. I take a cue from the awkwardness of the situation and sit down. Bill Harris puts the television on mute, and for a second, the room is quiet. Has someone died? I wonder.

Then comes what, to others, would be the bombshell, but to me is nothing more than the fizzle of a dead firecracker. Why she’s telling me this now? I don’t even know what to do with it. What do you do when you find out the man you called dad for seventeen years is not your father?

Later, I realize that she told me this around friends because she wasn’t sure she could do it alone. It must have been hard. I don’t know what she was feeling. Ashamed? Frustrated? Tired? I don’t know what she was feeling because I don’t know what I was feeling. It all seems to me as nothing. No emotions, no thoughts. I just feel blank.

I suppose that for some kids, who have seen their father every day and heard him talk about how proud he is of them, such news would be a shock. But for me, having not seen my “father” in years, I don’t know how to react. I take in the information that the man I never see, whom I gave up on long ago, is really not my father. Was he ever?

The fade out seems to last forever.

***

Yet this fade in never seems to end. The whole scene is fuzzy, as if the fade never finished. It occurred too long ago for me to be able to pinpoint my age. We’ve opened up the couch and we’re lying on the fold-up bed. It’s warm inside and the blankets add to it. My dad is a big man, even overweight, and I’m like a piece of paper next to him. His beard stubble scratches me and I laugh.

Like a pack of wolves, the wind outside is howling and circling around the house, and I’m ready to believe it really is, or worse. Laughing, my dad tells me it’s a monster. My eyes grow wide and I move
in closer, sure that the monster will break through the glass door anytime. Still laughing, he cups me in his arm, my eyes becoming heavy and the howling seemingly distant. It’s warm inside and, surrounded by blankets and my dad, it’s cozy. Nest-like. We’re waiting for my mom to get back but as I lie there, the world stands still. I’m in no hurry; I’m planted in the moment. My dad says something I can’t make out in my half-conscious state, his voice shaking me through his chest. It doesn’t knock me awake, but, like a gentle rocking, lulls me away from the world. Drifting in and out of sleep, I’m not so much tired, as I feel safe. Loved.

We fade, but the scene never fully dissolves.

***

We know there’s a fade in, but it’s not noticeable anymore. I’m twenty-four and the years all mesh together. The little boy who sat on the swing set all day is gone, having gone home when the sun went down. He’s gone and now there’s me, a different person altogether. *I’m self-sufficient. Independent. Adult.*

I taught myself how to shave years ago, even with the inevitable cuts. I’ve learned life morals and ethics from comic books, as told by Superman and Spider-Man. As my faith and relationship with God has grown, I’ve learned what it means to be a Christian man from books like *Wild at Heart* and *The Masculine Mandate*. My life has been filled with “father figures” and mentors, men who have taken time to teach me or help me in life. I consider myself lucky, knowing some people never have any of these things.

I haven’t seen him since last Thanksgiving, I think. It’s hard to remember, and truthfully, it’s not important. I see him and he’s a distant figure, a relative who comes around for holidays, if that. When he says “I love you” I can only nod and feel horrible afterwards. He tells me to call more often but I don’t have his number. He lets me know he’s proud of me, but he couldn’t say why.

There are so many things he doesn’t know, parts of my life he’ll never see. He doesn’t know where I go to college, the name of my last girlfriend, where I live.

He also doesn’t know I know we don’t share the same blood, that my mom told me the truth. Even if I didn’t know, though, I don’t think it would matter. I would have thought him to be my dad all of my life and never had known him as my father.

Cut.
Though he did not know it at the time he was writing, the words of seventeenth-century poet George Herbert would help “other hearts convert”—or at least encourage and instruct “other hearts” attempting to follow Christ—for centuries to come (“Praise (3)” 39). However, despite what some may label success, Herbert seems dissatisfied with his work. The dissatisfaction does not stem from a superficial, technical, or literary fault; he perceives a deeper, unavoidable, and insurmountable weakness inherent in his humanity. Herbert is caught in an almost torturous paradox: while he recognizes God as the only deserving recipient of praise, his offerings—his poems—do not seem deserving of God’s attention. It is in seeing the “standard” of praise God deserves and how far his poetry seems to fall short that Herbert reels in self-doubt.

Herbert is aware of humanity’s, and his, sinfulness. Humans are “feeble” and frail; they are but “brittle crazy glass” (“Denial” 23; “The Windows” 2). Their “weak heart[s]” provide little more support than to hold the “heaps of dust” that are themselves (“The Church-floor” 20; “Church-monuments” 3). They are “silly worm[s]” and “foolish thing[s]” that are “broken in pieces all asunder” (“Sighs and Groans”; “Misery” 2; “Affliction (4)” 1). Herbert’s pessimism could also be partially attributed to personal reasons: “The physical illness and pain that plagued Herbert throughout his life distract him from his task, but these problems are exacerbated by emotional issues such as a lack of confidence and motivation” (Oakes 121). It can then be no surprise that Herbert sees his offering to be worthless: “all [he] brought, was foam” (“Even-song” 12). His praise, like himself, is “untun’d, unstrung” (“Denial” 22).

At the same time, Herbert is conscious of God’s never ending deserving of praise. God is “Immortal Love” and “King” (“Love I” 1; “Jordan (1)” 15). He is “Creator”; He is the one to “make and mend our eyes” (“The Temper” 8; “Love II” 14). He has “supreme almighty power” yet endearingly calls humanity His “child” (“Prayer (2)” 7; “Dialogue” 9). Praise is rightfully due to God, and “the purpose of praise is to please God” (Yule 86). But Herbert’s own human modes of expression will never suffice. Especially in light of God’s greatness, he can claim to be “no link of thy [God’s] great chain,” and his praise makes the sound of a “poor reed” (“Employment (1)” 21, 24). Herbert makes the contrast clear: “Lord, though we change, thou art the same; / The same sweet God of love and light” (“Whitsunday” 25-26). He realizes that despite his “urge to write,” “his poems [can] never adequately celebrate their divine subject” (Wilcox 192).

But of one thing Herbert is sure: that all poetry and writing should be for God. In fact, to write about or for anything or anyone else may be considered derogatory to the only one who deserves admiration (Yule 79). Christine Yule elaborates on the consequences of writing about anything other than God: “For Herbert, to praise nature and not the God who made it both dishonours God and robs nature of its true dignity. To adore a woman in a love poem is similarly an idolatry, denying God the praise that is rightfully His, and making the woman ridiculous” (79). In his poem “Love I,” Herbert calls into question the focus of much other poetry: human love. Why should human love—a flawed love—be given attention instead of the love from the “author” Himself? the love that has “wrought our deliverance from the infernal pit” (“Love I” 1, 12)? The real source of love is not given credit in poems that celebrate human love. “Man” has rewarded “thy glorious name”—that of “Immortal Love”—to the “dust which thou hast made” (3, 1, 4). This “mortal love,” the love of humans, is not deserving of the same praise. Herbert carries on this discussion in “Love II,” the poem that directly follows “Love I.” The persona of “Love II” suggests that all of humans’ work, including that of poets, should be for God: “[O]ur brain / All her invention on thine Altar lay” (6-7). He promises that “Thou shalt recover all thy goods in kind, / Who were disseized by usurping lust” (11-12). This is to say that God will ultimately get the praise He
deserves even though humans and sin have wrongfully stolen it from Him. Focusing on the gifts from God, though they may be good themselves, neglects the value of the source of good (Wilcox 85). However, this realization does not alleviate any of Herbert’s frustration with his writing. Instead, such a strong and high purpose leaves little, if any, room for mistake.

These high stakes encourage thoughtful, and often critical, evaluation of any human’s work. Herbert only grows in disillusionment. The disappointment permeates even deeper in that not only can the flaws in his praise be attributed to his fallen humanity, but even the “process of poetic praise”—extravagantly worded, densely layered poetry—carries the scent of sin (Wilcox 193). The venue of praise that Herbert most often tends towards is tainted when the poet seems to display “too much pride” in his or her abilities (Oakes 121). In her essay “The Art of Praise: The Poetry of George Herbert,” Yule outlines her understanding of Herbert’s feeling: “[His] longing in his poetry is for his life to reflect the humble simplicity and the obedience to God’s will which Christ practised” (94). This interpretation is not unusual. Frances Cruickshank, providing a voice for Herbert, suggests that a “poem’s direction ought to be straight”: “tricks and devices” permit “natural beauty to be compromised by ingenious design” (13). Similarly, in Utmost Art, Mary Rickey notes Herbert’s tendency towards simplicity: “Verbal plainness for Herbert always was the vehicle of sincerity and sharpness of expression; its antithesis was not beauty or intricacy of idea, but pretension and imagerial clutter” (173). Simplicity, to Herbert, seems to include honesty, humility, and the absence of artificial ostentation. Without these characteristics, his method of praise through poetry and words, the skills for which he received from God, would be tainted.

But most reliable for alleging that Herbert sees sin in his praise are his own words from The Temple. The poet admits that he struggles even to express himself, let alone to offer worthy praise: “my hard heart scarce to thee can groan” (“The Sinner” 13). In addition, Herbert’s poetry may tend towards self-centeredness. While “Jordan (2)” begins “with an attempt to focus on ‘heav’ly joyes,’” it ends “with a disordered and distressed poem about his own ‘self’” (Wilcox 193). The poet whose lines “first . . . of heav’ly joys made mention” becomes absorbed in his own process, the “invention,” of adequate praise. Still, one of Herbert’s primary concerns is to maintain simplicity in his writing (“Jordan (2)” 1, 3). He wants to avoid “long pretence” (“Jordan (2)” 16). Even though “nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sun,” he struggles with the desire to “plainly say, My God, My King” (“Jordan (2)” 11; “Jordan (1)” 15). This is what Herbert offers in his own “composition sung alternately by two choirs in worship” (Slater 415); “Antiphon (1)” rhythmically repeats “My God and King” every chorus (2, 8, 14). So if praise offered in the form of poetry could at least satisfy the ideal of simplicity, perhaps Herbert could be more accepting of his work. Still, the very poems that assert this desire are intricately and purposefully designed with many layers of detail and meaning.

This dilemma is especially and specifically dealt with in several of Herbert’s poems. “The Thanksgiving” is a poem near the beginning of “The Church” (the third poem of the set), and it is a direct response to “The Sacrifice.” The poet attempts to thank God for the “grief” and “wounds” that He endured for the poet’s sake (1, 3). The poet tries different approaches. The speaker first wonders if he should share in God’s pain—to be “scourged, flouted, boxed, sold” (7). These words, without any conjunctions separating them and at the end of the poetic line, seem to pound the reader, emphasizing the harsh and physical suffering that they imply. However, as humans we can never fully share the grief of Christ, and Herbert acknowledges this limitation in “The Sacrifice” as Christ questions in agony, “Was ever grief like mine?” (4). Next the speaker in “The Thanksgiving” decides to thank God in his joy—through “sing[ing], skipping” (11). Through this filter of joy (and a taste of sarcasm in the tone), optimism transforms what could be harsh: “thorns” become “flowers,” a “rod” becomes a “posy,” and a “cross” becomes a “bower” (13-14). These lines of the poems are particularly filled with question marks. Perhaps Herbert is especially skeptical of what may seem like an irrationally optimistic point of view. It is possible that an overtly cheerful thanksgiving may not seem genuine. Subsequently, our joy cannot reach the thanksgiving deserved by Christ’s “fair, though bloody hand” either (16). The poet then makes promises—even facetiously extravagant promises—in an attempt to repay God out of thanksgiving. If he
is given “wealth, [he] will restore / all back unto thee by the poor”; if he gets married, “she and her children shall be thine”; if he “survive[s]” “three years hence,” he will “build a spittle” (19-20, 24, 32, 33). Throughout the poem, he avoids directly answering the question of what he can do in thanksgiving. He stops himself in the middle of the line: “As for thy passion—but of that anon” (29). Ultimately, the poet does not decide anything except that there is no way for him to provide the thanksgiving that is due. As if exhausted by the search, he ends the poem: “Then for thy passion—I will do for that—/ Alas, my God, I know not what” (49-50). Consequently, although the poem does not deal as intentionally with the process of writing, the insufficiency of human’s praise is clearly realized.

The two poems entitled “Jordan” deal more directly with the problem of sinning in the very process of writing. The name itself suggests a sort of sanctification, just as “the Baptism of the well-beloved Son Jesus Christ...didst sanctify Water to the mystical washing away of sin” (Slater 416). In “Jordan (1),” the poet suggests: “May no lines pass, except they do their duty” (4). Unnecessary embellishments in writing just serve as “veil[s],” obfuscating the poem’s purpose (9). To praise simply is associated with the “shepherds,” “honest people” (11). The very core of the poet’s message is all that is necessary. In “Jordan (2),” the poet strives for “quaint words” (3). Without a conscious effort to maintain simplicity, the speaker’s “thoughts...burnish, sprout, and swell, / Curling with metaphors.../ Decking the sense, as if it were to sell” (4-6). But he is still aware of this trend; he notices, “I often blotted what I had begun” (9). Still, the poet longs to please God. Wilcox outlines the predicament:

To praise God the ‘son’ requires the richest possible poetry, but to attempt to clothe the ‘sun’ is a foolhardy exercise which will shut off the source of light and life. Christ is both ‘son’ and ‘sun,’ and thus the desire to honour him in verse of one’s own making is shown to be self-defeating; the process of poetic praise obscures the very object of that praise.

The poet realizes the permanence of human weakness.

Three poems entitled “Praise” also help to clarify Herbert’s understanding of humanity’s role in praising God. The speaker in “Praise (1)” only hopes “to write a verse or two” (1). But the poem exudes a certainty that God will “amplify...his abilities” and allow his praise to “mount unto the sky” (Oakes 123; “Praise (1)” 7). The speaker unapologetically asks for help: “O raise me then!” (17). However, in “Praise (2),” “the poet’s abilities [...] seem more limited and his sinfulness a greater barrier to the excellence and aptness of his writing than in the prior poem” (Oakes 123). The voice of “Praise (2)” cries: “Though my sins against me cried, / Thou didst clear me” (13-14). Still, his utmost is given: “Wherefore with my utmost art / I will sing thee, / And the cream of all my heart / I will bring thee” (9-12). Thus, though the poet recognizes his sins, a sweet praise can be given, “the cream of all my heart” (11). “Praise (3),” as emphasized by Oakes, affirms the need for God’s confirmation to allow success in human action: “When thou dost favour any action, / It runs, it flies” (7-8). Through these three poems, Herbert illustrates different reactions to feeling the need to praise God through writing.

However, the problem of deficient praise remains. Perhaps even if there is not a complete relief of the tension between wanting to praise God and not being able to satisfactorily do so, there can be some sort of release. There is relief simply in the acceptance of the poet’s sinfulness. If the poet’s writing does not have to be perfect as God is percent, the poet is less likely to be overwhelmingly dissatisfied, i.e., dissatisfied to the point of paralysis. The goal of praise cannot be to mirror God; it can only hope to please Him “to some degree” (Seelig 39; “The Odour” 15). Another easing of the pressure can be found in Herbert’s “Jordan (2).” Near the end of the poem, the poet’s efforts are legitimized. A “whisper” provides an “honourable way out” if not a “resolution” (“Jordan (2)” 16; Wilcox 194). The “whisper” encourages the poet to “copy” from the original “source of love” (“Jordan (2)” 16, 17; Wilcox 194). Since the poet can never create satisfactory praise on his own, he is “to make use of existing materials” (194). The “sweetness” that Herbert so desires “is in love.../ ready penn’d” (17). Love has already been completed in the “Immortal Love,” and insufficient praise cannot mar it (“Love I” 1). In this way, the
poet still recognizes his or her own weaknesses in expression but is given some freedom to praise the all-deserving creator of love.

Part of Herbert’s answer, or at least acceptance of not being able to resolve the tension, may be found in a poem near the end of The Temple, “A Wreath.” The poet pleads, “Give me simplicity” (9). This request implies that he struggles to resist what he might consider “showing off”—designing a poem to a dizzying level of intricacy and illusion. However, the poem is full of complicated “weaving” motions. The alternating rhyme scheme, mirrored use of the same four words in opposite order in the first four lines and last four lines, and the words repeated in the lines that directly follow add to these layers of “weaving.” Yule notes the paradox: “This poem sets subtlety and devious sophistication—the way of death—over against simplicity—the way of life—yet it does so in a poem which is brim full of delight in its sophisticated versing” (93). The poet’s ways are “crooked” and “winding” (“A Wreath” 4). But the ways of God are associated with simplicity; as the very rhyme scheme of the poem: “thee” (that is, God) is paired with “simplicity” (6, 8). Perhaps this is not to condemn purposeful intricacy in writing and praise, as in “A Wreath” itself, but to acknowledge the purity and honesty of God. Though those offering praise can never reach this purity within themselves, focusing all God given energies and abilities through writing and poetry towards honoring God—giving the “utmost”—is not a waste of time—to the poet or God (“Praise (2)” 9).

The greatest relief of this tension may be found in the idea of a joint effort between human and God expressed in “Praise (3).” The poet explains this teamwork: “That which had but two legs before, / When thou dost bless, hath twelve: one wheel doth rise / To twenty then, or more” (10-12). It is true that humans have little to offer to this “teamwork”; Herbert is very aware of this universal weakness. Yet there is good news: God, in continuation of His love, is willing to do most of the work—even to make up for what is lost in human’s dissatisfying attempts at praise. In his book Reformation Spirituality, Gene Veith aptly describes God’s act of grace: “Herbert’s poetry and the kind of spirituality it describes is incarnational rather than transcendent. That is, human beings do not transcend the world to achieve union with God; rather, God enters the world to achieve union with human beings. The soul does not come to God; rather, God comes to the soul” (246). The poem “Repentance” tells of the restorative powers that God shows in humans and their praise:

- But thou wilt sin and grief destroy;
- That so the broken bones may joy,
- And tune together in a well-set song,
- Full of his praises,
- Who dead men raises;
- Fractures well cur’d make us more strong. (31-36)

Though humanity’s fallibility is true and even invades its praise, God’s grace extends and redeems even human’s feeble offerings and words.

A recurring thread in Herbert’s poetry is the struggle to accept the fact that, as a human, his poetry can never be the pure praise that God deserves. He is set up for continuation of the paradox insofar as he thoroughly realizes the depravity of humans at the same time as he believes in the incomparable greatness of God. But there are also glimmers of hope—not in his own skill as a poet, but in the infinity of God. God is able to overcome the fact that “[s]in is still hammering my [the poet’s] heart”; and God is able to “drop from above” in His grace and redeem both humans and their praise (“Grace” 17, 20).


The Blessing of “Affliction” in Herbert and St. Augustine

George Herbert’s *The Temple* represents many themes related to the relationship between God and the Church. Throughout Herbert’s five “Affliction” poems, the idea of salvation through suffering is a significantly distinguished process in the development of Christ’s relationship with both Herbert and the Church. Herbert’s emphasis on suffering in forming a mature Christian is similar to St. Augustine’s own personal faith journey conveyed in *Confessions*. Analysis of Herbert’s five “Affliction” poems reveals St. Augustine’s theology of salvation through suffering and grief in connection to Christ and the entire Church.

Within “The Church,” the second section of *The Temple*, Herbert’s five “Affliction” poems describe the role of suffering in the life of a Christian. Suffering is an inevitable human experience, and Herbert’s “Affliction” poems “represent a developing spiritual maturity in the attitudes they express” (Summers 1067). In *Confessions*, St. Augustine also utters his inquiries into “man’s life on earth [as] a long, unbroken period of trial” (232). Herbert and St. Augustine emphasize suffering as a necessary part of the human experience and describe similar challenging life experiences. In Herbert’s poem “Affliction (1),” the sorrows described reflect St. Augustine’s struggles recorded in *Confessions*.

Often characterized as Herbert’s most autobiographical portrait, the first “Affliction” poem is similar to St. Augustine’s own autobiography *Confessions*. The order of the poetry in *The Temple* is significant as a representation of Herbert’s and the Church’s spiritual development; therefore, it is no coincidence that the poem following “Affliction (1)” is titled “Repentance,” a word which is similar to “Confession.” As Herbert represents the speaker’s spiritual development, he is clearly self-focused in “Affliction (1)” through the “initial stages [of] the speaker’s relationship with God, but the disproportionate emphasis on self . . . reveals the speaker’s . . . lack of understanding about what such a relationship should be” (Rubey 109). In eleven stanzas, “Affliction (1)” describes the struggles a new Christian initially experiences. The first four stanzas of “Affliction (1)” depict the speaker’s willingness and “joy” when he or she first accepts the religious “service” of the clergy. In 1 Corinthians, Paul discusses how recent converts to the Christian-faith are given “milk, not solid food, for you [Corinthians] were not yet ready for it” (3.2); consequently, Herbert describes the “milk and sweetnesses” which he spiritually consumed as a newborn Christian, but in the years to follow, “woe” would “twist and grow” (19, 23-24). Through the rhyme “grow” and “woe,” Herbert is developing his understanding of the process of “woe” to help him “grow” in his relationship with Christ.

The first “woe” the speaker describes is a physical malady, which is what St. Augustine complains of in *Confessions*. As the speaker of “Affliction (1)” proclaims “Sicknesses cleave my bones /… And tune my breath to groans” (26, 28), St. Augustine confides that “At Rome I was at once struck down by illness . . . and I came close to dying, close to losing my soul” (101-02). The second “woe” of “Affliction (1)” is the loss of a friend, as the speaker declares “thou [God] took’st away my [the speaker’s] life, / And more; for my friends die: / My mirth and edge was lost” (31-33). In *Confessions*, St. Augustine describes the devastating loss of one of his friends when “My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death. . . . My eyes searched everywhere for him [his friend], but he was not there to be seen” (76). The third “woe” described is that of a court or academic life when the speaker of “Affliction (1)” “takes the town,” and although God is portrayed as “betray[ing] me to a lingering book, / And wrap[ping] me in a gown” (38, 39-40), the speaker acknowledges God’s blessing in providing “Academic praise” (45). St. Augustine was also a scholar and excelled in academics, but these scholarly pursuits played a role in the conflict between the flesh and the spirit. In *Confessions*, St. Augustine recounts how he “studied the art of eloquence . . . for it was my ambition to be a good speaker,
for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity,” and through this course of study, he started to read and discuss philosophy with a “bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth” (58). From bodily sickness, the death of loved ones, and education, “the conflict between the demands of ‘the world’ and those of God forms a problem in all Christian experiences” (Smithson 128). “Affliction (1)” and Confessions describe the weary travels of two separate Christians, who in the midst of their suffering dishearten at the presence of pain.

The conflicts of life are culminating at the end of “Affliction (1),” and though Herbert leaves the poem without conclusion, the speaker expresses his or her concern to “change the service, and go seek / Some other master out / . . . . Let me not love thee [God], if I love thee not” (63-64, 66). When the speaker’s expectations for only pleasant experiences are not met, the speaker “complains and threatens to rebel because of the presence of so much pain” (Smithson 134). The last stanzas of “Affliction (1)” describe the speaker’s rebellion against God “caused by the pride which is one aspect of the insistent emphasis on self throughout the poem, and this pride is a force that drives the speaker away from God” (Rubey 110). “Pride” appears throughout “Affliction (1)” as the speaker recounts the many unjust “woes” throughout his or her life. While the speaker does not remain accountable for his or her role in generating “woe,” the speaker’s “pride” is evident when he or she proclaims that God is the one that “troublest me” and considers abandoning the “service” (61, 63). This “threat” formed from “pride” leaves Herbert’s first “Affliction” poem inconclusive, representing the wavering controversy within a Christian’s soul to accept another “master” if he or she cannot love God in the right way.

A considerable portion of “Affliction (1)” is devoted to describing the speaker’s conflict between his or her love for things of this world in opposition to the will of God. The speaker’s arrogance keeps him or her from finding joy in the Christian life because the emphasis of “Affliction (1)” is extremely egocentric. The disconnection between the speaker of “Affliction (1)” and God is a result of the speaker’s stubborn heart against God’s will; likewise, St. Augustine describes his pride throughout Confessions that separates him from God. Throughout Confessions, St. Augustine emphasizes his sin in “look[ing] for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him [God] but in myself and his other creatures, [which . . .] led me instead to pain, confusion, and error” (40-41). St. Augustine and Herbert accuse God of being the perpetrator of their struggles, and St. Augustine takes this thought process further in understanding that though he is “struggling to reach you [God], you thrust me back so that I knew the taste of death. For you thwart the proud” (86). Until St. Augustine and the speakers of Herbert’s “Affliction” poems “deny [their] own will and accept [God’s],” they will continue to describe affliction as a condemning force in their lives (181).

Herbert continues to reflect St. Augustine’s emphasis on temporal and spiritual conflicts throughout his other four “Affliction” poems, in which the speakers’ maturation is expressed in accepting suffering and God’s will. When reading the five “Affliction” poems as a set within The Temple, “the series [as a whole] moves from confusion and partial truths to assurance and completeness” (Rubey 107). The attitudes throughout the “Affliction” poems shift from the first “Affliction” poem’s individual focus to the realization that Christ and the entire Church share in the individual’s suffering. Instead of focusing on his personal afflictions, Herbert connects his sufferings to the sufferings of Christ, as well as the suffering of the entire Church.

In “Affliction (2),” the speaker comprehends that his or her personal grief is nothing in comparison to the amazing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The poem begins “Kill me not ev’ry day, / Thou Lord of life; since thy one death for me / Is more than all my deaths can be” (1-3), which portrays a shift in thinking compared to “Affliction (1).” While remaining narcissistic with the repetition of “me” throughout the poem, the speaker of “Affliction (2)” begins to acknowledge the immensity of Christ’s suffering in comparison to the speaker’s own temporal pain. Although the words “kill” and “Lord of life” sound contradictory, this phrasing represents the speaker’s understanding Christ as the purveyor of “life” through killing the old, sinful nature. St. Augustine realizes that Christ is “Our Life himself [who] came
down into this world and took away our death. He slew it with his own abounding life, and with thunder
in his voice he called us from this world to return to him in heaven” (82). As a paradoxical bringer of life
and death, Christ “kills” the sin with His own death, and humanity’s reaction can never equate to Christ’s
great sacrifice. The “Affliction” poems connect the role of suffering to the Christian’s relationship with
Christ and reassert the question found throughout The Temple—“What shall I return to the LORD for all his
goodness to me?” (Ps. 116.12). The speaker of “Affliction (2)” asserts that Christ is “… my grief
alone, / All my delight, so all my smart: / Thy cross took up in one, / By way of imprest, all my future
moan” (11, 13-15). Christ is not only the speaker’s “delight” but also brings the “smart” or hurt. As Christ
purifies the Church through struggles, “the idea of God's love for man has been implicit in the pleasures
and joys the speaker has experienced, but it is equally present in the afflictions and sufferings” (Rubey
110). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “imprest” in Herbert’s lifetime meant to
provide an “advance (of money) made to one who is charged with some business of state, to enable him to
proceed with the discharge of the same” (“Imprest” def. 1a). With this use of the word “imprest” at the
end of “Affliction (2),” Herbert is characterizing the cross of Christ as the ultimate bearer of grief, and
humanity is indebted to the Lord for His sacrifice. The only response the speaker can articulate in
“Affliction (2)” is to acknowledge Christ’s awesome sacrifice and contradictory role of bringing joy and
pain. Spiritual development continues throughout the remaining “Affliction” poems, which further
connect the Church’s present and future sufferings to Christ’s sacrifice—the epitome of pain—whose
“one death for me / Is more than all my deaths can be” (2-3).

The themes of the Christian’s debt to Christ and the role of grief in life persist throughout
“Affliction (3).” From the beginning of the poem, the speaker acknowledges that God “wast in the grief,”
but not only is God in the speaker’s grief, He also “guide[s] and govern[s] it to my relief” (2-3). While the
Christian is afflicted, God does not abandon His people “for in you [God] alone the soul can rest. You are
there to free us from the misery of error which leads us astray, to set us on your own path and to comfort
us by saying, ‘Run on, for I shall hold you up. I shall lead you and carry you on to the end’ ” (St.
Augustine 132). The speaker of “Affliction (3)” describes God as “Making a sceptre of the rod,” in which
the “sceptre” is a “symbol of regal imperial authority,” and the “rod” is an “instrument of punishment”
(“Affliction (3)” 4; “Sceptre” def. 1; “Rod” def. 2b). The first stanza reasserts Christ’s experience with
suffering, creating a “rod” of “authority” and governs the process of the Church’s affliction. The second
stanza recalls the image of the Church as indebted to Christ, for the Lord “know’st my tallies,” in which
“tallies” are a “way of recording debts” (“Affliction (3)” 8; Slater 424). God knows how long the
suffering on earth will persist, but the speaker is hopeful that each sigh “then only is / A gale to bring me
sooner to my bliss” when he or she is in heaven with Christ (11-12). “Affliction (3)” appears to place
more emphasis on the role of “grief” in bringing “relief,” in which “relief” is the speaker’s physical death
leading to an eternal relationship with Christ in heaven.

In the third stanza of “Affliction (3),” the speaker exclaims that suffering and persecution are
blessings that connect individual Christians to Christ. In accepting Christ’s sacrifice and grief as the only
course to humanity’s salvation, the speaker comes to the understanding that in becoming a Christ-
follower “Christ’s image becomes a typological model for the Christian’s mutually physical and spiritual
path to salvation” (Watkins 77). This final stanza describes the relationship between Christ and the
Church by first describing Jesus’ suffering:

Thy life on earth was grief, and thou art still
Constant unto it, making it to be
A point of honour now to grieve in me,
And in thy members suffer ill.
They who lament one cross,
Thou dying daily, praise thee to thy loss. (13-18)

In the Bible, Jesus calls people who want to follow Him to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily
and follow me [Christ]” (Luke 9.23). Jesus proclaims that people will only find true life if they take up
the cross of suffering and follow Him, but Christ does not call people to bear a greater burden than He
does. In fact, Jesus Christ’s life on earth was full of suffering, and even now, He continues to suffer with the Church. “He departed, but he is here with us,” and He guides the speaker of “Affliction (3)” to a greater “bliss” than the present sufferings endured on earth (St. Augustine 82).

“Affliction (4)” begins by recording the speaker’s distress in the midst of present suffering. The words “broken,” “scatter’d,” and “prick” throughout the first three stanzas are “images of dissolution, breaking up, and chaos, of man broken by this tempering process” (“Affliction (4)” 1, 9, 12; Rubey 115). St. Augustine sympathizes with this debilitating process and reacts by clinging[ing] to you [God], for it was you who released it from the deadly snare in which it was so firmly caught. It was in a state of misery and you probed its wound to the quick, pricking it on to leave all else and turn to you to be healed, to turn to you who are above all things and without whom nothing could exist. (118, emphasis added)
The speaker of “Affliction (4)” is in agony, but instead of wallowing in his or her afflictions as in “Affliction (1),” the speaker calls out to God for help in the fourth stanza and recalls that He is the speaker’s “life” who “scatters by his light / All the rebellions of the night” (23-24). The rebellious pride of “Affliction (1)” has dissipated in light of Christ’s sacrifice and the speaker’s connection to Christ and the Church. As God refines the Church through suffering, the speaker connects the previous “Affliction” poems to God as a figure of authority who accrues debts and uses “grief [as] an instrument . . . in his ‘pay’ ” (Smithson 136). While “grief” is used as payment for sharing in the blessings of life through Christ, this “grief” is again described as bringing “relief; / With care and courage building me, / Till I reach heav’n, and much more, thee” (28-30). Moving further from the individual emphasis of “Affliction (1)” in procuring the benefits of salvation without suffering, “Here man is stretched toward heaven to meet arms with God, perhaps the arms stretched on the cross, so that man can have a part in the union, so that he can be something more than just a recipient” (Rubey 114). The speaker of “Affliction (4)” now concedes that a Christian’s “acceptance of one’s sufferings, purification by fire, [is] the way that leads to rest with God” (Clements 267). “Affliction (4)” overtly states that the Church is refined by “grief” to bring “relief,” in order to share an intimate relationship with Christ.

The speaker of “Affliction (5)” concludes the set of “Affliction” poetry in a complete understanding of the dual role of grief and joy to connect the Church with Christ. The first stanza proclaims that the Church is more firmly “planted” than “Paradise” because Christ is the Church’s “anchor” who “strengthen it in ev’ry age, / When waves do rise, and tempests rage” (2, 5-6). St. Augustine also compares the Church to a “floating Ark” “tossed on a tide that puts us to the proof,” where as Christ is “constant” and “steadfast” (“Affliction (5)” 3, St. Augustine 76). In the second stanza, the speaker looks back to “Affliction (1),” in which the Christian discusses the benefits of being a Christ-follower, yet “When we grew wanton, thou didst use displeasure / To make us thine [God’s]” (“Affliction (5)” 9-10). St. Augustine also discusses the conflict between the flesh’s desires and God’s will in his “eager[ness] for fame and wealth and marriage, telling God, “you only derided these ambitions. They caused me to suffer the most galling difficulties, but the less you allowed me to find pleasure in anything that was not yourself, the greater, I know, was your goodness to me” (118). God has thwarted St. Augustine and Herbert from seeking their selfish plans by redirecting to Him through pain.

Suffering is now accepted not only as the consequence of an individual’s pride, but also as a method in strengthening the entire Church. Throughout the “Affliction” poems, suffering is portrayed as a storm, and in “Affliction (5)” the image is complete as the entire Church is a forest of “trees, whom shaking fastens more, / While blustering winds destroy the wanton bowers, / And ruffle all their curious knots and store” (20-22). While humanity suffers in a temporal existence, “You [God] were always present, angry and merciful at once, strewing the pangs of bitterness over all my lawless pleasures to lead me on to look for others unalighted with pain. You meant me to find them no where but in yourself, O Lord, for you teach us by inflicting pain, you smite so that you may heal, and you kill us so that we may not die away from you” (St. Augustine 44). Affliction challenges St. Augustine and the speakers of the “Affliction” poems to root themselves firmly in the life and death of Christ. The “Affliction” poems
recognize that suffering edifies the Church and brings Christians together up to Christ, for “Affliction
then is ours” (19). Christians do not suffer alone; Christ has gone before the Church and leads His people
into a glorious eternity with Himself.

The “Affliction” poems represent the growth in understanding the spiritual forces surrounding the
individual Christian in relation to the entire Church and Christ. Herbert and St. Augustine reflect similar
spiritual development in comprehending salvation through suffering. Herbert’s and St. Augustine’s
similarities show their shared belief that suffering in a world while leading a Christ-centered life is a
challenge for all Christians, who must deny their own will and bear Christ’s cross.

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Music was important to George Herbert—he played the lute, and, according to Carl Holliday, “was accustomed to set his own sacred verses to music and to sing them of evenings”—and in his poetry he frequently uses musical metaphors for the human soul in relation to God (Hayes 45, Holliday 273). Primary among these metaphors is the comparison of people to musical instruments that, when tuned by God, are able to better offer praise to him and glorify him. Tuning and tempering—basically the same thing, although “[s]trictly, ‘tuning’ should be used for systems in which the frequencies of the notes in the scale are proportional to integers”—are terms used repeatedly in Herbert’s works to signify the way God works on people to bring them into accordance with himself (Barbour 64).

Herbert’s poetry in The Temple contains many references to music, although not all of them are related to tuning. In “Prayer (I),” for example, Prayer is described as “A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear” (8). The word “tune” here is a noun, not a verb—it refers to a melody, not the act of tuning. In “Grief,” the speaker describes his emotion as “exclud[ing] both measure, tune, and time,” implying that “neither poetry nor music is sufficient to account for” it (Herbert 17, Mattison 326). “Antiphon (I)” and “Antiphon (II)” are written with a call and response like antiphonal music, which was designed in medieval times to be sung by two separate choirs placed at opposite ends of a church. Neither of these says much about music aside from encouraging songs of praise; rather, they are like songs themselves.

“Church-music,” like “Antiphon” I and II, is obviously related to music but says very little about it. At least, the musical terminology of which Herbert is certainly capable is absent. Instead, the poem appears to be addressed to the music itself. Rather than talking about the music, the speaker is talking to the music, thanking it for the way it distracts him from bodily discomforts, pointing him “to heaven’s door” (1-4, 12). One writer, emphasizing the line in the second stanza that says, “Now I in you without a body move,” asserts that “the poem is not about church music but about the understanding of music one gets in church, which is a kind of music that has nothing to do with the body…. [T]he deflection toward abstract harmony and away from sounded music is inherent for Herbert in the process of thinking about music” (Herbert 5, Mattison 337). However, knowing Herbert’s enjoyment of playing the lute and setting poetry to music, this seems like a bit of a stretch. Though the fifth line does say “without a body,” it and the following lines also speak of moving, “rising and falling” with the “wings” of the music. Body or not, these are kinesthetic images that call to mind the pleasures of listening and moving to music.

Although “Church-music,” the “Antiphons,” “Prayer (I),” and “Grief” have little to do with tuning, a much larger proportion of the musical references in The Temple do mention tuning or tempering. Whether it is the body or the soul that is out of tune and needs to be restrung like Herbert’s lute, it is clear in each instance that the instrument cannot tune itself; rather, it is by the grace of God alone that anyone can sing melodious praise in harmony with the Holy Spirit.

The earliest example of such a metaphor in The Temple can be found in “The Thanksgiving.” In this poem, the speaker is trying to come up with something he can do to “imitate” Christ’s sacrifice (15). After mentioning several things—giving to the poor (20), saying that if he ever marries his wife and children will belong to God (24), giving up a blasphemous friend (25-26), building a hospital or roads (33)—he eventually comes to music, as if he has been building up to it: “My music shall find thee, and ev’ry string / Shall have his attribute to sing; / That all together may accord in thee,/ And prove one God, one harmony” (39-42). Essentially what Herbert is saying is that “ev’ry string,” that is, every fiber of his being, will sing God’s praise, thereby being in “harmony” with him. “Harmony” is defined in The Harvard Dictionary of Music as “The relationship of tones considered as they sound simultaneously, and the way such relationships are organized in time; also any particular collection of pitches sounded...
simultaneously, termed a chord” (Randel 379). It is worth noting that harmony is not the same as unison; being in harmony with God is not being just like him, but being in agreement with him, the way the individual notes of a chord are in agreement and thereby produce a pleasing sound. “Peace” is described as “harmonious” in “Conscience” (9). Thus, being in harmony with God can be compared to being at peace with him.

The word “find” is interesting (Herbert 39). “The Thanksgiving” and the poems surrounding it (and particularly those preceding it) in The Temple have to do mainly with Christ’s sacrifice, and Herbert seems very concerned with being more worthy of that sacrifice—bringing himself nearer to God—finding him. It is in music that he feels most able to do this. Other works are insufficient, but perhaps his “music shall find” God and bring Herbert into harmony with him. He is careful to conclude “The Thanksgiving” by acknowledging that there is nothing he can do that will be truly worthy of Christ’s “passion,” but music seems the best of his options (49-50).

Tuning for agreement comes up again much later in The Temple, in “Ephes. 4. 30. Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c.” This poem is a response to Ephesians 4.30, which says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (English Standard Version). The speaker in the poem laments the fact that his sin grieves God (17-18), and then asks God, “Oh take thy lute, and tune it to a strain, / Which may with thee / All day complain” (19-21). The lute here refers to the speaker—he is asking that God change him (tune him) so that he hates sin as much as God does. The next line says, “There can no discord but in ceasing be” (22). This is not to say that as long as one is being tuned by God, so to speak, there will be no dissonance—as Joseph Summers writes,

We may need to be reminded … that the vitality and interest of a musical composition depend in large part upon dissonances which are resolved before the cadence; dissonances are not truly “discords” unless they occur at the end of a phrase or a composition. “Ephes. 4. 30. Grieve not the Holy Spirit, &c.” insists that man's only true “discord” occurs when he ceases his song to God. (158)

The very end of the poem makes this even clearer: “Lord, pardon, for thy son makes good / My want of tears with store of blood” (35-36). Herbert has an accurate view of humankind’s sinfulness and knows that he cannot be perfect; thus, his focus is on communion (harmony) with God, because God will keep tuning him so that the dissonances resolve before the end. Similarly, “Aaron” speaks of “doctrine” that is being “tun’d by Christ” (23). This, again, conveys the sense that the tuning is designed to bring its object—the speaker’s doctrine—into agreement with the tuner, that is, Christ.

The image of a person being tuned by God as if he is an instrument comes up many other times in The Temple. One instance can be found in “Easter,” which is appropriate given the traditional importance of music to the Easter celebration:

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day. (7-12)

The symbolism of lute strings for Christ’s “stretched sinews” is apparent, but the question of “what key / Is best” for Easter is less so (11-12). Edward W. Naylor sheds some light on its meaning in an article on Herbert and two of his contemporaries:

There have been various standards of pitch in use during our own time, e.g., the military band pitch even now is higher than the Concert room pitch. I myself have played the organ part in Mendelssohn’s St. Paul a semitone lower in order to meet the pitch of the orchestra. But in Herbert’s day, say 1630, the variation in pitch was extravagantly wide…. [T]his is quite enough as an illustration of Herbert’s verse, which speaks of stretching the strings to the high pitch suitable for a high day, i.e., Easter. (96-97)
It seems that in the seventeenth century, at least, music was played in different keys depending on the occasion; this explains why there might be a certain key most appropriate for Easter.

The next stanza in “Easter” also has to do with music:

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all music is but three parts vied
And multiplied,
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art. (13-18)

The word “consort” is a musical term that means “a company or set of musicians, vocal or instrumental, making music together,” or “the accord or harmony of several instruments or voices playing or singing in tune” (“consort,” def. 4 and 3a, OED). When used as a verb, it can also mean “to combine in musical harmony” (“consort,” def. 7, OED). This is the sense the word takes in this poem—“combining” the “heart and lute” to make music (“consort,” def. 7, OED, Herbert 13). Since Christ’s sinews were compared to the strings of a lute in the previous stanza, the lute in line 13 could represent the body. “[B]ut three parts vied / And multiplied” refers to the way any chord is made of three notes (four in the case of a seventh chord); other notes that may be included are called accidentals and not considered part of the chord (Herbert 15-18, Naylor 97). The speaker in this poem is asking the Holy Spirit to be the third note in the chord. Summers adds, “it is probably not irrelevant that much of medieval music was written in triple rhythm and in three parts because of the symbolism of the Trinity,” and, “We should recognize that ‘twist a song’ is specially appropriate to polyphonic music,’ in which each voice ‘bears’ a distinct ‘part’” (160). The poem begins with, “Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise / Without delays,” so it is saying the human life should be like a harmonious chord or piece of polyphonic music constructed of the body, heart, and Holy Spirit working together to bring praise to the Lord (1-2).

More tuning of the body occurs in “Repentance,” which is placed between “Affliction (I)” and “Faith” in The Temple. After a confession of sins, the poem ends in praise for God’s grace:

But thou wilt sin and grief destroy;
That so the broken bones may joy,
And tune together in a well-set song,
Full of his praises,
Who dead men raises;
Fractures well cur’d make us more strong. (31-36)

This emphasizes God’s role in raising his “broken consort” to make music of praise (“Dooms-day” 29-30). God’s role as tuner is similarly emphasized in “Providence”:

. . . [A]ll must appear,
And be dispos’d, and dress’d, and tun’d by thee,
Who sweetly temper’st all. If we could hear
Thy skill and art, what music would it be! (37-40)

It is God who does all the tuning and tempering; we are only broken instruments without him.

Although the poems mentioned so far have talked about tuning the body, there are certain of Herbert’s poems that focus on tuning the soul, or breast. One of the best examples is “The Temper (I).” The speaker here is lamenting his inconstancy and inadequacy (1-8); he pleads with God not to “rack” (stretch) him “to such a vast extent” that they reach each other, saying that the distance is too great (9-14); yet finally he admits that God’s “way is best” (21): “Stretch or contract me, thy poor debtor: / This is but tuning of my breast, / To make the music better” (22-24). As Fredson Bowers explains, “As man is stretched by his afflictions to promote repentance, so a lute string is tuned to produce harmonious chords of praise and thankfulness. This tuning of a musical instrument to adjust its pitch, and to bring its various strings into correct harmonic relationship, is known as tempering; and here it is obvious that we have one of the underlying puns on the title” (207).
“Denial” also contains the metaphor of the “soul” being “Untun’d, unstrung” (21-22). Herbert writes,

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
Defer no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my mind may chime,
And mend my rhyme. (26-30)

To illustrate this tuning of the breast and mending of the rhyme, Herbert wrote the poem so that the last line of each stanza does not rhyme—until the very end. After being jarred by “And disorder,” “Of alarms,” “But no hearing” (twice) and “Discontented,” none of which rhyme with their preceding lines, it is a relief to have the very last line “rhyme” perfectly with the one before it (5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30). Hearing “rhyme” and “chime” in such close succession calls to mind the sound of bells playing in harmony (29-30). As was perhaps intended, this has the same effect on the ear as, in music, using a deceptive cadence—that is, going from the dominant chord to any chord other than the tonic (often the submediant)—several times before finally resolving to the expected tonic chord. At the last line, the breast has been tuned, the rhyme mended, the chords resolved, and the reader can relax.

This resolution is key to George Herbert’s musical metaphors. The point of being tuned by God is not to be in tune with oneself, but to be in tune with God, to have one’s music “find” him and bring glory to him. A person is tuned for the purpose of making music with the Holy Spirit, and even though there will be dissonance in life, when it comes to praising God, “There can no discord but in ceasing be” (“Ephesians 4.30,” 22).
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