availing

collected works on
religious and spiritual life
2013
availing

A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. - John Ruskin
editors’ note

This collection of literary and visual art shines a light. It is a light rising from the experiences of the artists, born of moments of illumination, and developed in reflection and the passing of time. Probing the corners of cathedrals, the concerns of the destitute, the small yet large space of Davidson College, this year’s issue of Availing brings together stages of light in hopes that readers may see things anew.

The issue is organized like a flipbook, each piece of prose, poetry, and artwork meant to illuminate and flicker, revealing both the darkness and the light. Like a candle, each piece in this collection sheds a light, momentary and poignant, on the place and time from which it sprang.

We selected the front and back cover photographs for the issue in this spirit of light. The front cover, by Tyler Wilson ’14, greets us with the bright smile of Mariah Ahmed ’15; the back cover, by Mary Murphy ’14, leaves us with the solitary presence of candlelight. Enjoy. Meditate. Be illuminated.

Katherine Burd ’14
Ivana Masimore ’14
Mary Murphy ’14

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adoration
(prayer at the mosque of moulay idriss, fes, morocco)
    katherine burd ’14
First came the rain. Thick, fat droplets were soon followed by sheets of water that pounded the deserted street. The clap of the thunder joined in, accentuated by brilliant flashes of lightning across the dark sky. Next followed the wind, littering tree branches across lawns, upsetting trashcans, and making the swings in the backyard dance precariously back and forth.

And then the power went out.

The lights flickered before fading altogether. The speed of the ceiling fan grew slower and slower until the blades ceased to spin. The blaring of the radio died into an unsettling silence. The hazy glow of the computer ceased, a clicking sound audible as the machine faded. The orange light of the digital clock ceased to glow. Even the streetlights outside my window were extinguished.

I found myself sitting in a dark and quiet room. I couldn’t remember the last time I had sat in complete darkness. Or complete silence, for that matter.

I tiptoed carefully through the dark hallway until I came to the kitchen. Opening the cabinets, I began blindly feeling for a candle, and nearby, a half-used package of matches. I took both and delicately made my way back to my room.

I struck the match, a flame and a protesting hiss resulting. Touching the match to the blackened candle’s wick, I marveled at the quick exchange. The soft, pale glow illumined the room, casting shadows across the walls as the flame danced under my breath. A small layer of dust was visible on the candle, and as the wax melted, the dust was swallowed into the thick liquid pool. A soothing vanilla fragrance wafted through the air as the flame continued to glow. It was unlike the glow of a computer or a cell phone or a television. Something about the flame seemed alive and rather unpredictable.

Perhaps minutes, perhaps hours later, the power returned. The lights came back on, the fan began to spin, the radio resumed to blare, the computer returned to life, and the digital clock blinked “12:00.”

Regretfully, I blew the candle out, watching its smoke softly trail into the air before disappearing altogether.
what i know
annalee kwochka '15

The wings of the butterfly are a church window's stained glass, easily broken by a child's errant, playful fingers.

Now think of possibility, apocalypse—world on back of a turtle, on back of a turtle, all the way down—think of turtles stumbling.
Am I not right, to live in fear?
I have held shattered glass
felt its bite, watched fresh blood fall,
but pain is not the window through which I see the world, Look—
the light is right today, there are prayers
In a butterfly's orange wing, cathedrals captured in a leaf's veins.

I have to tell you I'm sorry, honey
Yes, the red-crackling leaves are rotted underneath.
Yes, the woman who does your taxes feels nothing, looks in the mirror, sees no one,
even as she calculates your worth.
Yes, the road you drive home is worn down more each day, to dust returns
an old man on the curb rocks back and forth back and forth, back and forth
in time with the world's disrupted rhythm.
Yes, I have felt all of these things.
I am unsteady, slipping—

It's turtle shells, all the way down.
But there are church pews in the forest, they are made of cocoons, and right now, I have a choice.
divine light: ruminations on space and time in a french gothic cathedral
-spencer zepelin '15

Introduction and Background
After you've been to enough cathedrals, entering one is a little like coming home. But it's more like home after you've been away for a while. Here's the nave, the transept, the choir, the forward procession of the arcade, the graceful rise of the elevation. These things are all the same. Stepping off a train in a new city, you learn to orient yourself by its cathedral. Scan the sky for spires; find the short end, the apse, and it always points east to the Holy Land of Jerusalem. Suddenly, you have a compass rose jutting out from the landscape.

But every cathedral is unique. They all speak in the same language—this vocabulary of structure—but they all say something different. Here the skeletal elegance of slender piers, there the detail of the tracery, each a unique manifestation of a particular builder's or church official's vision. Some cathedrals strive for proportion, others for sheer scale.

Gothic architecture began in the Île de France region around Paris in the twelfth century. Abbot Suger of St. Denis and his master builder created a revolutionary new building inspired by Suger's understanding of the theological significance of light. Light acted as the manifestation of the divine. Romanesque buildings, however, were dark, heavy, massive. The Gothic, then, aimed at opening up the space making it light, airy, ascendant. Three architectural advances allowed for the development of the Gothic: the pointed arch, the ribbed vault, and the flying buttress. Together they allowed for buildings with drastically different dimensions that redirected the weight of the roof onto specific points in the walls to allow for the buildings to be replete with stained glass. As the light poured through the stained glass, the interior of the cathedrals, as well as the stories and scenes depicted in the glass, became literally filled with divine presence. Over my three weeks travelling around Northern France I sought to investigate this notion of light as the embodiment of the divine and of these buildings that, though artifacts, exist so potently in our world today.

Outside of Time
Our experience of time is linear, narrative. One event follows the next in elegantly simple succession. But, just because this is the manner in which we experience time does not mean that this is an objective experience of time. When Augustine writes about God's relationship with time, he does not speak of God as before time but rather outside of time. We can perhaps reconceive of time as all existing simultaneously, start to finish, Creation to the end of days.

All this time always exists, but our nature as human beings only allows us to access one moment at a time proceeding in linear succession.

Cathedrals can help us conceive of time differently. They are at once medieval buildings and modern buildings. They are medieval because, of course, they are artifacts of that period, but they are undeniably modern insofar as they exist today. They are not merely artifacts but functional spaces. They have marked exits and electric lights next to centuries old portals, notices about services and events beside information on the buildings' origin, exhibits on a fundraiser for Haiti beneath centuries old windows. All of it exists simultaneously in the moment in which we experience it. The Chartres of today is the same Chartres that people of all classes helped construct, the Reims not just the burial ground but the erstwhile stomping ground of so much royalty. All these moments exist in this space at once. The Gothic cathedral is a place of convergence. Time is not a line but a web, a tapestry, a quilt, each instance in time and space connected to so many others.

Stasis and Change
What makes up the space of the Gothic cathedral? They are built of rock and light. The rock frames the space, encloses it. The light fills the vessel. Cathedrals are characterized by their oppositions. Many of the stones have stood for centuries, unmoving, rocks hewn and stuck into place. The light, by contrast, is always changing. Sitting patiently in a seat in the nave as the sun makes its trip across the sky, the light changes. The space changes. The stones are still in place, but it is not the same building it was before. It is both changing and staying the same, rock and light, the material and the immaterial, the earthly and the divine. Here again, we see the Gothic cathedral as a place of convergence.
But, upon further consideration of the stone and the light, which is changing and which is staying the same? While the light appears to change, we should not be so brash as to assume that it has. No, in fact the light has stayed the same. It is us, our environment, our space that has moved, that has shifted. The stone, by contrast, is young, only in place a few short centuries. The light will glow on—from our sun and others—long after our rock has melted away. Cathedrals remind of this interplay, they caution to jump to conclusions about what is static and what is constantly in a state of change.

**Reading a Cathedral**

A cathedral, as the famed Chartres tour guide Malcolm Miller is fond of saying, is like a text. Yet, as a spatial text, it can speak to anyone regardless of the verbal language they might speak. To those who have learned a certain vocabulary for the Gothic, the cathedral can be read as a work of art. To those who understand mechanics, the cathedral speaks in the language of thrust and tension. To those who are Catholic or Christian, the cathedral represents fellowship, tradition, communion. But the truth is that no one reads through only one lens. The cathedral is read by mindfulness of one’s mere physical presence within it. We have much to learn from these buildings, if we are willing to listen, to wait with them, wait until we are no longer just looking at the building but actually present in them, a part of the space that they enclose. We are the cathedral. In reading the cathedral, we cannot help but read ourselves.

People sometimes use the term “thin places” to refer to the sort of liminal space that provides if not access then at least greater proximity to the divine or transcendent. I tend to eschew this notion of a “thin place” simply because I think it implicitly suggests that other places are thick, privileging certain spaces as more valuable or sacred than others. The cathedral can be a helpful guide though. It can help us learn to appreciate the quilt of time, the splendor of creation, the unbelievable sublimity of momentary existence. By helping us gain access to these experiences and emotions, we can take the cathedral with us wherever we are; we can find sanctuary in any moment, any place. We can feel divine light coursing in every fiber of our being, and, regardless of our beliefs, we can be grateful.
Over a millennium ago, the Japanese monk Kūkai retired. Instead of throwing a party, he began to fast. After telling his disciples that he would expire in a week, he entered a private room, folded his legs into lotus position, and began to meditate. Myth claims that Kūkai entered a state of permanent meditation.

When I arrive at Mount Kōya, all I remember about Kūkai is jotting “founder of Shingon Buddhism” beside his name in religion class. Now, my glossy “Guide to Kōya” informs me that this monk was also a civil servant, scholar, poet, calligrapher, inventor, engineer, and artist. Seeking distance from his demanding public life, Kūkai established a Buddhist training center at the remote Mount Kōya.

The landscape mirrors Kūkai’s theology: like the petals of the sacred lotus flower, eight peaks encircle a central plateau representing the Buddhist cosmos. From the west, pilgrims once ascended the twenty-three-and-a-half kilometer trail to Kōya. They passed through the crimson Daimon Gate and crossed the city to reach Okunoin, the sacred site of Kūkai’s mausoleum. Feeling thoroughly modern, I float up the mountain in a cable car then across town in a bus. As I fumble for my fare, an automated recording chirps, “Okunoin. Mount Kōya’s most sacred spot, this is the largest graveyard in Japan.”

I step toward the stone bridge entrance and glance again at my brochure. Ichinohashi, the first bridge. Tradition claims that Kūkai will meet me here to escort me to his mausoleum. As the afternoon sun warms this chilly thought, I cross the bridge.

Pause. I suddenly feel like a child at the Imperial Palace, surrounded by stately cedars that lift their fingers to tap the sky. Sunshine rolls from the clouds, trickles down their arms, plops onto the lichen-crusted tombstones at their feet.

Camera-strapped tourists bustle forward. I stand. Over 200,000 graves. Monks, feudal lords, scholars, and shoguns—in death, all press close to the enshrined Kūkai. When the Buddha of the Future arrives, Kūkai will awaken to lead all humanity to salvation. No one wants to be forgotten.

As I recommence my walk, I see Jizo statues playfully clustered around the cedars’ feet. Passers-by often leave snacks for the Jizo, ranging from radishes to cupcakes. They also drape the cool stones with cheerful bibs—poppy-studded yellow, cream-striped blue.

Though the Japanese revere the Jizo, protector of deceased children, they also coddle him like a toddler.

I notice a few younger tombstones that the brochure doesn’t mention. Smoother than their wrinkled companions, they glisten with familiar names—Sharp, Panasonic, Toyota: already-prosperous corporations who safeguard their success by securing memorials at Okunoin.

My brochure tells me that the next bridge I cross will carry me to the afterworld. Stretching cedars and age-streaked tombstones quietly observe my progress. Much as Hansel and Gretel happened upon a confectionery cottage, I now come upon a thatched-roof hut constructed entirely of stone. If I peep inside, I wonder whether I might find a granite monk poking chopsticks into his pebbly rice.

Presently, I reach Gobyono-chohashi—the bridge leading to Gobyo, Kūkai’s shrine. I step over thirty-seven stone planks representing the Buddhist deities. Just beyond the bridge, the Hall of Lamps screens my final destination. Illumined by more than 10,000 lanterns, this hall contains two flames that have burned continuously since Kūkai’s retirement.

With a tourist’s ease, I fall in with an American family—Polo father matched with Sperry son, both driven by coral-lipstick mother. After gathering my vital statistics, the mother chats smartly of the recession and lobster and summer internships. With her conversation teasing my ears, I watch the evening sun baste the cedars. Darkness weaves through the cedar-tops, and we cross...
behind the Hall of Lamps.

Illuminated, the central altar grabs my gaze. Life-sized lotus statues burst from it like sunbeams. They twist towards the stars as a monk drones an incense-scented prayer.

Behind the altar, framed by the lotuses, a modest mausoleum presses into the hillside. Its walls encase Kûkai’s body like a jewel, but his spirit wafts out to brush Okunoin with peace.

the psychologist, falling asleep

The latest book on his bedside table speaks of the “weepers” — real people — apparently, Muslim ascetics who cried incessantly, so terrified were they that the judgment day was coming, so convinced that they would never be good enough to merit paradise. They lived in mourning, made their home in the dark and desolate world, aware only of the fall, of sin, of suffering.

He puts the book down. Rolls over in bed, dwarfed next to the empty, creased-sheet reminder of a beautiful woman. They should be diagnosed, he thinks. Would be, today, in the West — Generalized Anxiety Disorder. He wonders what faith feels like, wonders if they knew. Did they know, for example, that wild turkeys — big, ungainly birds, heavy like the flesh of a beating heart — can fly?

He doesn’t sleep easy anymore. He is hesitant about diagnosis — but then — he used to fall into pillows like heaps of autumn leaves, the woman beside him with hair like a mermaid. He used to dream of red lipstick-ed lips, long eyelashes, long fingers. Last night, eventually, he dreamed only of spinning — of the men in his book, who in meditation become Whirling Dervishes, spinning and spinning away from the world, into dhikr, remembrance of God. Perhaps he should leave, he thinks, perhaps he should live in a cave. He wonders how he lost the woman who no longer sleeps next to him. Then — a sudden fall — sleep arrives before he can quite remember why he misses her so much. His brow is creased, still fitful. Tonight he will dream first of caves, empty and dark, but then — turkeys, flying.
The warm breeze passed through the palms and open windows into the room where we sat in a circle on a tile floor, listening to an elderly nun. This was one of those nuns who talks with her hands, speaks Spanish with a Brooklyn accent, compares spirituality to midwifery. Just before we left her room in Suchitoto, she said something that struck me as eerily true, some truth that seems irrecoverably lost in the States. “I feel most close to God when his name is on my lips,” she said. Yes, of course, I thought. She went on to describe her first time skiing, “I looked out over the mountains, the town, the lakes in the distance. I marveled at God’s creative energy and I said aloud, ‘Oh my God!’” Yes, of course, I thought.

Her eyes grew deep, she became the Sybil of Delphi, as she whispered her experience from the top of the mountain. “Then I looked down the hill, through the twists and turns of the slope. I trembled at the thought of how easily I could be hurt on the way down, how little control I would have and I thought to myself, ‘Oh…My…God….’”

I learned then what I had always thought to be true: for something to be worthwhile, to be valuable, to be full of God, it need not be beautiful. Reality contains what is beautiful and what is horrifying. Together they give life meaning. Instead, our culture tries to hide the ugly. We use the word “beautiful” as a shield more than a descriptor. Even things that are not technically beautiful are said to be so that we can remain at a distance from what makes us uncomfortable. In reality, though, a rose and a rotten apple could not be more different, though both undeniably real aspects of creation.

In a pew at the chapel where Msgr. Oscar Romero was assassinated, I saw this truth play out dramatically. A few feet in front of me a man had been murdered 30 years ago. With my own eyes, I had seen the bloodstained clothes he had been wearing while saying that final Mass. A tragedy, a disaster, a mess. But I also knew from the many depictions of Romero I had seen that the Salvadoran Christians felt the soul of this man resurrected in them, in the pueblo. So that room in which I sat became real. Very, truly real. Not real in the American sense of reality where it must be beautiful, symmetrical, sterilized. The space was a real space because it contained both the memory of sobbing nuns over the bloodied body of a saint and the birth of a new mission for the Church, a new power for the people of El Salvador to stand up for their freedom.

Over and over again I noticed that this country, this trip felt so much more real than anywhere I had ever been. I think it’s because things are real there. And more importantly, God is real there. God is not a reflection of imagined beauty, but objective reality. We deny God reality if we confine God to beauty. Instead of fearing imperfection, as we do, the Salvadoran people fear denying things their authenticity, their truth—no matter how painful or unpleasant some of it may be. I saw so much beauty there: sunsets, smiles, sparkling lakes. But I also witnessed heartbreaking testimony, gut-wrenching photos of torture, things that cannot justly be called beautiful. At the University of Central America, where six priests were dragged into a yard and shot, a rose garden grows. But it is not a stylized or organized garden. A rose plant grows where each body was found. No symmetry, no pattern. Just red roses growing where red blood soaked the earth.

Sometimes I become frustrated with this picturesque world we have created for ourselves. I imagine an elderly nun, in typical Salvadoran clothes, clutching ski poles, staring over the landscape before plummeting down the slope…and I long to return to a world more real. So I try to think of my God when I see suffering and darkness just as often as often as I do when I see a colorful sunset or a friend’s kindness.
the crypt of oscar romero: the underground saint

Elizabeth Welliver ’16

old woman bows on her hushed knees
like an infant suckles on her mother’s breast,
the woman sinks her forehead into the iron-cast chest
of an underground saint.

beside her, a stirring sea
of voices, mandolins, mass of common people
a love-marching flood
gazed upon by the soft eyes
of their prophet’s hope.

the singing, the silenced, the quivering lips
all listen with palms open
to the memory of the one who spoke:
“Let us not tire of preaching love.”

the woman bowing her forehead
remembers the bullet in his chest
that could not destroy his heart,
yet sent shockwaves into the people’s bodies

he died, and thirty thousand came to grieve
under the fire of surrounding artillery.
they stood convicted to trust
the call of Christ’s justice.

thirty three years later
a resurrected body gathers to praise
the message preached
by the underground saint.
they sing solely for the violence
of love.
My first month of Arabic at Davidson was entirely devoted to learning the Arab script. However, class was often supplemented with lessons on cultural staples like short introductory phrases and greetings. Among those early phrases was In Sha Allah. Our textbook translated it as “hopefully”—suggesting that the phrase is used in situations where the future outcome is uncertain. There is also the religious translation, “God Willing,” which alludes to the perception that God is the architect of the future. Yet I was often perplexed by the nuances of meaning in this Arabic idiom. It was not until I experienced Arab culture in Jordan that I truly grasped the complexity and the variety of meanings encapsulated in the single phrase In Sha Allah. In fact this phrase defined the most powerful moment of my entire trip and I want to retell that story.

For my entire life I have been very involved in service. Therefore, when I arrived in Amman and settled into my apartment and daily routine, I immediately began to search for service opportunities. There happened to be a student at my Arabic Institute who was the Amman director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), an organization in Amman which runs a number of schools for refugees and provides social services to their families. She relentlessly encouraged me to volunteer with the organization because they were in need of English teachers.

So I showed up the following day at the building JRS used as both a school and office building—thinking that I would be given a specific classroom with a consistent group of students. Basically, I thought that I was going to be a permanent teacher for a set group of students for the two months that I was in Amman. Well, that is not exactly what happened. Instead, I acted much more like a substitute teacher that filled in for any of the permanent teachers, who for some reason or another were absent that day. In hindsight, however, this was a much better position because I got meet and interact with a variety of people. For example, one day I would teach children from Syria the English alphabet and the next I would review a practice dialogue about the airport with intermediate English students.

The day that stands out the most, though, was a Wednesday when I was co-teaching an advanced conversation class with my roommate. Before class we decided to discuss life in the United States as that day’s “conversation” with a huge hand-drawn map of the country as our guide. In that class our students were predominantly adults, extremely well educated, and Iraqi. Their questions varied from queries about the weather in Detroit versus the weather in Boston to an urgent interest in the status of the U.S. job market.

At that point my friend and I split up the class so that our students could have more intimate practice with a native English speaker. I sat down with about four Iraqi women all of whom had fled Baghdad when the U.S. Army invaded. All of these women were very interested in the jobs that they could find in the U.S. because in Jordan it is illegal for a person with refugee status to work. These women desperately wanted to gain the independence working would give them. In response, I asked them what kind of education they had received in Iraq. All responded with descriptions of the universities they attended (even if only for a short time), but each one of them said that it was irrelevant what type of position they got in the U.S. In fact they said they would wash dishes or clean houses as long as it meant that they were in the U.S. and free from the horrific isolation they experienced in Amman.

Then one of the women pulled me aside and began to describe her family to me; she only had one son, who was about to turn 14. She further informed that her family had received refugee status from the U.S. and that they were simply waiting for their security clearance. I responded to this news with In Sha Allah, wishing her and her family the best of luck with that process, which can take anywhere from six months to two and a half years. She repeated In Sha Allah. Staring directly into my eyes, she then asked how her son would do in a U.S. high school. My heart fell, literally dropped, as I looked into her eyes. I saw there the tormented soul of a
mother relentlessly striving to provide the best environment for her son. I could see in her eyes her willingness to conquer all obstacles if it meant that her son could have a better life. She would bear the brunt of minimum wage labor, racism, and cultural separation for the rest of her life if it meant that her son could grow up in what she perceived as the greatest and safest country in the world.

How do you respond to that, when you know that her son will face extreme difficulty in the U.S.? I asked her how his English was and she hesitated before saying that it was not great. We do not have universally successful English as a Second Language courses in Spanish let alone Arabic here in the U.S. And with her son’s English as average I knew in that moment that he was probably never going to succeed in the U.S. educational system. I felt like crying and holding this women and assuring her in that moment that her family will be welcomed and cherished in the U.S., that her son would graduate high school on time and receive a scholarship for college etc. But I knew that that would disillusion her. Instead I encouraged her to study English with her son constantly, in the hopes that when he transferred to a U.S. high school he would be able to understand what his classmates and teachers were saying. Then I wished her the best of luck and told her that their future will be bright, In Sha Allah.

That was the day I learned the most important meaning of In Sha Allah. When you utter that phrase a relationship is formed between you and the individual you say it to. Most of the time this relationship is superficial and merely a polite response to an acquaintance’s hopes for the future. But every so often it forms an incredibly deep, personal connection between two individuals. This relationship recognizes the extreme vulnerability we all experience as we contemplate the uncertainty of the future. In that moment of utterance we realize that both of us are completely powerless against the chaotic universe yet we are conscious of our equality in this thing we call life. We both face the unknown and most graciously wish each other the best it has to offer, In Sha Allah.
through a glass darkly

*megan mavity ’14*

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror…”

Paul the Apostle, Letter to the Corinthians

When I was a child I talked like a child.
After every meal my brain would spin as I
Rushed to my mother’s lap, peering up
At her etched marble face, asking that anxious
Question that would guide each of my moments
for the next sixteen years:
“I be lean? I be lean?”
Such perversion and poison tumbling from
My unknowing kindergartner lips,
Inflecting my soul more and more deeply.

When I was a child I thought like a child.
My grandma had warned me that
Only fat people drank more than
One cup of chocolate milk.
I looked at my pink Cinderella sippy cup,
Stained with guilt and a ring of chocolate, as
I met shame for the first time.

When I was a child I reasoned like a child.
The popular girls giggled when I shuffled past
Trying to hide behind my braces and lopsided pigtail braids.
They gleefully sketched pictures of me behind my back
Lovingly carving each zit deeper into my caricatured face
With their cruel ballpoint pens.
I reasoned that if I was the skinniest of all of them,
Maybe the snickering would go away.

Paul, you say that when you became a man
You put childish ways behind you but
I must lament that though I am no longer a child
And though my once twig-body actually offers
Some semblance of curves
And though my BMI is not teetering on a cliff-edge
Of slow, subconscious suicide,
I have not put these childish ways behind me.
I see myself: the poor reflection as through a glass darkly.
The woman (am I woman? am I child?)
Peering back at me has
My mother’s marble face
And my grandmother’s aching gray eyes.

I need new eyes because
I am James’ woman who looks into the mirror,
Sees her reflection and
Then leaves, forgetting at once what she truly looks like.
I hear the nutritionist, the therapist, my friends,
my God tell me that I am at a healthy weight,
that I am not too large, that I am beautiful because of
the inside and not the outside
and yet…and yet….

When I walk into Commons I talk like a child
Think like a child reason like a child
These childish ways they steer me
Towards the gleaming silver salad bar
That will always prevent me
From life to the full
If I persist in worshipping it.
Let me build my offering of
spinach red peppers carrots black beans beets
hummus if i’m feeling daring
and watch me die a little more…
Elijah may douse his offering in water
And still watch it burst into flames;
As a high priestess of the bitter god ED
I can douse my salad in my tears
And still watch it char under the flames of addiction.

The sins of my mothers have passed down to
the third and fourth generation,
Moses warned them and still they never halted
In their pursuit of perfection
Found in the neat package of a
Thimble-sized waist
And toothpick legs.
I joined the slowly swaying death march
At age five and have not left since....

I am my mother, my grandmother,
my great-grandmother's daughter.
Their legacy knit together by pain
And silent angst
And closet-eating
And excuses
And fear
Bitterness shame guilt
Thrums prophetically in my veins
I carry the contagion in me.

Will my daughter forever remain a child?
Or will she put these childish ways behind her?
Will she escape the punishment
Trickling menacingly down
Through the shared blood of our generations?
Or will she join me in this perpetual staring,
This perpetual hating

Of our etched faces
Seen as through a glass darkly?

---

yom kippur
alexis grant '14

Framed by fiery maples, white sky looming-
Thirty-six pairs of feet make the annual trek
through a brittle world of orange-brown.
Unhurried, we talk of daily things, like
what's up with Yankees
and how is your mom?
It's a long walk and
and a new year and, for once,
we have the time to ask and to listen.
White light dances on the
brightest of the fallen leaves.

Thirty-six pairs of feet reach the water's edge.
Gleaming (like a mirror held up),
its deep color guarding the secret
of its depth,
It waits.

The wind changes and a wave of songs
(a wave of sorrys) starts at a hush
and grows louder. We peer
into the mirror and see
ourselves as
He might see us—

Hands in pockets reach deeper, deeper, deeper—
(sins like breadcrumbs collected there)
until they reach something positively
Grainy-gritty-coarse-crumby.
A year's worth of sins (memories?) saved
For this moment of taking/shaking out in front of God and every-
one
To see-absolve-forgive-forget-remember ("never again")
To be lightened-cleaned-fresh—
—new.
amazon tower sunrise
(inferna, peru, july 2012)
ivana novinore 14
I attributed opposing extremes to the 13,000 feet of earth upon which I stood: the intensity of the sun’s rays and the biting chill of the thin air. Both sensations attempted to overwhelm me, alternately battling for my attention as we made our way down a narrow path to the chakra. The man ahead of me, with a five-gallon sack of potato seeds slung effortlessly over his left shoulder, had a face with deep-set wrinkles either from years of exposure to the elements or from habitually smiling. I think both are contributing factors. He unloaded his burden gently on the ground, took a moment to study the breathtaking scenery surrounding us, and returned to instruct me in preparing the potato seeds for planting. I tried to imitate his technique in severing the long, purple roots from the potatoes’ many eyes, picking up my pace as I gained more confidence with the shriveled spuds.

He shook his head at my work, although not in frustration or condemnation. He explained the process of sacking and storing in the earth. Each seed that I had rather carelessly tossed into the “done” pile had already spent five months maturing to arrive at the planting stage. And even now, the road ahead (including but not limited to avoiding hungry critters, battling inclement weather, waiting on precipitation, and depending upon nutrients from the soil) would be long and difficult before the seed-turned potato could fulfill its final baked, boiled, or fried purpose. “I can work the land, and plant the seeds,” explained Silverio, my host and my teacher, “but after that, I have very little control over how the earth, and the sky, and the animals treat the crops. I respect these forces and ask in faith that they provide me with a rich harvest.” He continued with humble resolve, “We will do a ceremony to the Pacha Mama (Incan Earth deity) before we plant.” I suddenly felt wonderfully helpless and small.

I then had the incredible fortune not only to watch Silverio present an offering of wine to the earth and sky, but to participate as well. I knelt beside the small hole in the moist dirt of the chakra, holding the palm-sized shell of wine with trembling hands, and asked the Lord to make the land fertile and grant them an abundant harvest. Three slow drops of the offering drink fell upon the thirsty land as I blessed the seeds and the fertilizer; two more burgundy drops landed as I asked God to bless their family and their house. The unavoidably genuine faith required to live off the fruits of your cultivated land struck me. In my world, faith can be an easy act to perform because we have designed a society that allows us to believe that we have ultimate control. From my car window on the drive to the supermarket, billboards boast hamburgers “just the way I like it” and propagate the message that I should “have it my way.” Then, once I am inside my chain-owned-mega-super grocery store, I have more options that one could ever need at my convenience, at my choosing. In this world, it seems as though my car gets me to the store, I decide for what I have an appetite, and my money seals the transaction: a series of events deceptively requiring very little faith. However, this man and his family recognize the fragility of their lives and must faithfully submit to powers beyond their control.

The way in which this man’s entire life embodies faith overwhelmed me. I recognized in that moment that God can use anything to reveal his glory, as He had just done through a traditional planting ceremony to honor an Andean earth goddess. Although I am more than six months removed from the community of Huchuy Qosqo, and separated by thousands of miles, I continue to meditate on my mountain-top encounter and strive to characterize my life by the kind of faith I witnessed demonstrated not only in word or ceremony, but, in deed.
In the spirit of Love, there is room for every beggar, body, broken limb and beat. There is space on that great floor for every fault and folly to be magnificently tuned, turned to divine Celebration. The One who plays music is just a dancer, but the Spirit that resides in the motions, tapping feet, drumming beat, motion fullness of life. Here I am, standing before Life’s rhythm, beating myself into a corner, watching my arms and legs with a suspicious fear. How shall I know if I am worthy of the dance? What if I do not know the words to each song? What if my motions are too swift, or harsh, or I do not belong? What, then, if I cannot be God?

Come and dance with me, I hear, spoken into the softness from God’s tender heart to my own. I will lead you into the spontaneity of free limbs becoming sparks of Light.

No movement can take you from my sight. No rhythm could set you apart from my delight. Here, with me, is room for every beggar, body, and beat. Let your feet move as I lead you and you shall be made free. Come, shall we dance, to the unity of my heartbeat?
martyrdom in El Salvador
(translation: “that my blood be the seed of freedom.”)
photograph by Joey Allaire '15
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