The poet Rilke writes “I live my life in widening circles.” This has been my experience putting together Availing this year. Each piece submitted, each poem and story, each photo and drawing pushed wider my experience of the divine, my understanding of the transcendent. What I love about this line of Rilke is what I also love about this collection you are about to read: it asks the reader to move outward. We are not meant to sneak out into the world in the dark to gather bits of shiny poem only to scurry back into ourselves and contemplate them in isolation. My hope is that all the pieces in the next pages will add an outward ripple, push us gently farther from our hearts of fear. This never feels comfortable, but I hope you will shelve your fear and discomfort and inclination towards isolation. Instead let these explorations of spirit widen you.

Pax,

JOEY ALLAIRE ’15

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SET OFF II
AUDRA REAGAN
Have I dug the well of my silence
A little too deep for words?
What little quenching water it would yield
I hoarded to make it worth a little more.

So I sink it down little deeper
In search of cold pure clarity
To cure a parching drought
Instead of drawing up and out.

For I did not want to hear
An answer of rattling echo
At the other end of my reaching
From uplifting an empty bucket.

Or find it full of mud and clay
Scraping past the end of effort
And filling in the unwanted answer
To the question I was trying to ask.

So no one comes to the well
That never will have water
Where digging deep for words
Will make me worse than shallow.
We measure our self-worth based on our material strength. Nicaragua would fail most of our success indicators by all accounts. It is the 2nd poorest country in the Western hemisphere after Haiti and is plagued by an extremely corrupt government and history of dictatorship and violence.

La Joya would be one of those places, considered poor by any kind of external judgment criteria. We arrived to a house with only one main room, smaller bedrooms and a wood fire kitchen. There was no water – the family carried water from the well and stream using buckets. The furniture a few plastic chairs and one table. The walls bare, except one mirror and a few photos. Shyness loomed as we asked simple, expectative questions like – Is there a bathroom? A latrine? Will we sleep on the floor? A hammock? Ok, so we just use the bathroom outside- and where do we put the trash? Let it out in the wind.

Already my critical mind is making circles—how different my host family is from the tiled bathrooms of Davidson, and sleek Macs lining every flat surface of the school. Kenia and Marlon lean over a flip phone, a device my friends and I regularly make fun of. I wasn’t expecting it to be this poor. My privilege is showing itself. We are afraid to go outside and climb under the barbed wire fence to venture behind the rocks and trees to poop. We are afraid to use the cold water and bathe outside with the bucket in the middle of the backyard, where Daniel is chopping wood and Marlon is sharpening a machete. We wait to be served our food, and don’t know how to use the limited water to clean the dishes without a faucet.

Fear and uncertainty. Is this what strong people do when they live within weakness? I remember a Bible verse we read about how God chose the weak to shame the strong. And I do feel the shame, the humiliation of being so privileged that I am afraid of all the little things that are a regular part of life in La Joya.

It’s raining outside. We watch the ground turn from its dusty light brown to coffee brown. The
boys eagerly go out in the night to find me a
bean pod to show me how red beans grow. No
entiendo como sacar los frijoles. Es como la planta
de café o cual? The family teases me, and we
tease Daniel about his balding. And although I still
feel weak in this unfamiliar place, I feel acceptance
of my weakness and glad to have experienced it.

Maybe in that tension of being uncertain,
weak and out of place – I found that I didn’t need
to prove my strength. I didn’t need to prove my
value as a Spanish speaker or medic, as a pre-
med student who has perfect grades in organic
chemistry. I am a clueless girl eating beans every
day, not even knowing how they grow.

And Daniel and Estevia did not need to prove
anything to me. They were happy regardless of
the absence of amenities we consider completely
necessary for survival. They were not weak; they
were strong with the community and empowered
to understand their problems, support their
neighbors, and fight for change.

Jesus once said if we believe in him we should
not fear because God would always provide.
Before, I wondered exactly what he would
provide – because it wasn’t material things. There
are many who live in poverty. I am starting to
understand what God provides may be a little
more important-

- a hope to turn dreams to action,
- a love that is unconditional,
- a courage to trust what we cannot see or
understand,
- a power that is greater than what we can do
alone.

Am I strong? Strength is not something
measured by a number, something that NGOs
and economists can calculate on a scoresheet. It’s
what Padre Cardenal said carried him through his
entire life of service to revolution – el que no vive
para servir, no sirve para vivir. The love of God
gave him strength to overcome fears of capture,
torture, death—to fight for the people. Nicaragua
is strong – you can feel it in the rolling hills, lakes
and volcanoes, the gritty wind, the love for the
pedazo de cielo.

And I’d like to be strong too.
To You, on a heavy morning, when brittle skin rubs against crisp bed sheets, could You hear my heaving desire to swim out from under -

To underwhelm You with girdled hunger, the belly crowded with pangs of self-afflicted tremors along the fault lines of hollow ribs

To pour out for You the dead brush of my veins, the contaminated blue in ebbing states of desire to evaporate too quickly

To unearth the invisible contents of grief and let it moan undertoned tales of fathers who leave mothers to sing children

To sleep through the shadows of spiders’ webs corners to hide in darkness

To pray that You might crack the tyranny of the critics screaming as loud as my fear (too thin, too thin, your hair breaks)
To unravel this fallow field, the lining of my body that no longer sheds to know womanhood apart from the red sea

To reach You, the invisible one, I try to wrap You around like a cloak these arms that groan for You

To touch the self-imprisoned woman hair breaking, ache blue fingertips, blood where cold cuts skin

To imagine the endless night when death will enter these hollow bones, will I rise as a feathered saint, or a thin and reverent woman dead mourning her own heavy skin?
I’m from the city of a thousand minarets and from Bismillah Al-raham Al-raheem.

I’m from the beautifully woven prayer mats and from the calming smell of incense and the sacred smell of musk filling our entire house on Fridays, and from Ahlubayt who gave all, waiting for nothing in return.

I remember that I am from my mother’s voice reciting prayers at Dawn, and from my family breaking fast at grandma’s on the first day of Ramadan, and from the eternal call of “La Llaha Lla Allah.”

I’m from the sacrifice of Karbala and from “people who are of two kinds, either your brother in faith or your equal in humanity.”
I couldn’t tell you exactly when I decided that I would be doing a year of faith-based service work after graduating from Davidson. Maybe it was when I was nailing shingles to a roof in Pittsburgh. Maybe it was after reading a little too much economic literature on poverty. Heck, maybe it was back in high school when the Jesuits got to me with their whole social justice shtick. When exactly it occurred is immaterial; somewhere along the way, I felt a calling and made a decision that I hadn’t really thought about since. Or at least, not until my friends started getting jobs.

The first ones were those going into consulting or investment banking, fields which you couldn’t pay me enough to enter. I wish them well, but what they’ll be doing isn’t for me. Then came the research assistants, and I found myself envisioning an alternate world in which I was contributing to important research at some think-tank or maybe the Federal Reserve. I enjoy research, and wouldn’t that look better when applying for grad school, anyway? Then came the people going to grad school. Suddenly my friends seemed so far ahead of me, being accepted into programs that are, for me, a distant goal. Worse yet, there’s a path to that goal; they’re on it, I’m not, and I’m falling behind. Some days, I’m happy with my decision. Other days, I feel like I’m missing the boat.

But maybe I’m not supposed to be on the boat. Yes, there is a clearly-defined path to where I want to go, but should my path be determined only by my own desires? I can’t truly love my neighbor if I’m more concerned about my career. Are money and career prospects how I should measure my success? Jesus blessed the peacemakers, not the resume-builders. Ultimately it comes down to this: God calls fishermen out of their boats and economists out of their offices. Who am I to say no?
“THOUGH THE GRASS WITHERS AND FLOWERS FADE...”
MARY SCOTT MANNING
HINGS TO DO TODAY

ELA HEFLER

1. White out the news headlines
2. Accept peace and war as children of humanity
3. Wrap loose ends in irrevocable acceptance
4. Treat labels the way you would a dictator
5. Free the waters
6. Breathe courage
7. Pick the flowers that bloom from human thought
8. Hold the curves of the clouds in the angle of your wrists
9. Respond to all questions in silence
10. Feed the ego only celery until it withers
11. Lose focus
12. Find self
13. Alleviate the inarticulate of their burden
14. Lie prostrate before your ignorance
15. Be the Atlas to someone’s Earth
16. Sacrifice your hair
17. Endure
On the second day in Reynosa, Mexico I found myself reading a note from my prayer partner that read, “I pray that today you are enjoying God’s most precious gift of people...people you have never known, never had any reason or inclination to know, and finding in each other nothing less than the image of God.” I read her note that morning; I headed out to my work site where we were helping a family build a cinder-block home for themselves. As the day wore on I found myself thinking of the only word on the front of the letter my prayer partner had sent me: courage. I had not been acting courageously. I was using the work as an excuse for not talking to those around me. Part of the reason I was not engaging in conversations with the Mexican workers was fear of the stories they would share.

The reality of Reynosa is that poverty advances at a much faster rate than development., that the children on the worksite would most likely never even make it to high school. The reality is that for every family we helped build a home there is another family in desperate need of one. Being a first generation Mexican-American, daughter of parents who once immigrated to this nation in hopes of escaping some of those same realities, I was afraid to get to know the people around me. I was afraid their stories would hit too close to home and I wouldn’t be able to get through the work days without tears.

But standing at the worksite, I decided to act on my prayer partner’s note. I decided to get to know the people who I was working with. I found the image of God and all that He represents in the face of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a big man with a warm smile. When I casually struck up conversation he did not shy away; within a few minutes we were laughing together. Though his laughter was a wonderful sound, I felt closest to God when Ezekiel changed the nature of our conversation. He began to tell me of his oldest son, who had been beaten up by some locals involved in the drug cartels of the area for standing up to them. He told me about how he is past the point of fearing for his own
safety because he does not want to live the rest of his life hidden in his home. He told me about how violence swept his community and how not all people are involved with the drug lords. We stood under a tree and I listened. It was one of those unexpected moments where you make a human connection without trying.

We talked about his ailments, my parents’ immigration to the United States in contrast to his inability to remain in Texas for more than two weeks, many years ago, because he hated hiding from anyone (a reference to his lack of proper documentation). We laughed at jokes that I could not properly translate. He taught me how to cut rebar and pour cement mix. He asked how I was doing every morning.

I believe I met Ezekiel because he had a story to tell that I was meant to hear it. His story reminded me of the countless other narratives I have heard when I visit family members in other parts of Mexico. I saw in him a reason why mission trips matter; it is more than just building a physical structure for a family, it is about creating relationships in unlikely places and carrying those stories with you wherever you go. Mission trips, though not perfect, have the capacity to cross borders.

I never spoke with Ezekiel directly about God but the more I sit on our conversations the more I realize I felt the presence of God in him. I felt like I grew spiritually in making that connection with Ezekiel. His resilience and chattiness, amidst the larger issues that plague his community, remind me of a fundamental thing we shared: humanity. We were humans, all equally vulnerable, before each other and God. In that vulnerability I found the courage to listen to narratives rooted in pain and transmitted in laughter. In the end, I felt closer to that god I sometimes question.
The Psalms grew out of a people's history, lived experiences, stories told and told again. The images that occupy our minds are various and unique. We removed the images from Psalm 95 and came together as a community to plant our own experiences of the world, of God, and of ourselves.

To the right are two psalms in which our images sing to the Lord.
Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the vessel that holds all things together.

Let us come before God with thanksgiving and extol God with music and song. For the Lord is gracious, present, here.

God, the source of my wonder, the silence at the center of the spinning world, In Whose hands are past, present, and future, and to Whom belongs the breeze, the brook and all bounty.

The sea is God’s, for God made it, and God has protected the creatures of the deep, from the ocean’s crushing pressure.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before God the lover of our wandering hearts, who bows to us in return.

For God is our blood, our bones, our breath, and we are the people of God’s heartbeat, the flock under God’s care.

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to one who makes the oceans roar.

Let us come before God with thanksgiving and extol God with music and song. For the Lord is compassionate, protector, counselor, guide.

God, the great tree whose shade shields us from the harshness of the sun and wetness of the rain, In Whose hands are us, Your humble people, and to Whom belongs the mountains snow-capped with angel kisses.

The sea is God’s, for God made it, and God has filled it with grey whales with barnacled hides.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before God for He/She is the fabric of our lives, which clothes each of us.

For God is our steadfast parent, caretaker, motivator, and we are the people of God’s hearth,
When I told people I met in Israel that I would be participating in a month-long program in Tzfat, I got funny looks. “Tzfat is a really religious place...what could you possibly have to do there for a month?” When I got off the bus at Tzfat central bus station and started out on foot to find the Livnot campus, the sky darkening around me, I had no idea what I was walking towards.

I knew within five minutes of walking I had found a new home.

On the surface, Livnot U’lehibanot (Hebrew for “to build and be built”) is a hiking, community service, and spiritual learning program for young adults. But any former chevre (participant) will tell you that it’s a lot more than that. Livnot is the kind of place where you can sit for hours on the roof under the stars talking about relationships, life goals, and God with people you met several hours before. It’s the kind of place where people rush to the kitchen to help with dinner and dishes because with music blasting and many hands, chores aren’t really chores. It’s the kind of place where a long hike through the Golan Heights culminates in a text study about radical amazement followed by cliff jumping through a waterfall at the bottom of a vast canyon.

Tzfat is one of Israel’s four holy cities, and it has been the center of Kabbalah since Sephardic Jews migrated there in the late 15th/early 16th century after the Inquisition forced them out of Spain. When I say Kabbalah, I’m not talking about Madonna with a red string bracelet around her wrist. Kabbalah is the rich mystic tradition within Judaism that provides deeper interpretations of early Jewish texts to suggest connections between the physical and spiritual worlds. On Friday nights in Tzfat, you can feel Shabbat in the air. Little boys with payot (sidecurls) peeking
out from under knitted kipahs (head coverings) run through the streets past their parents who greet each other joyfully at synagogue doors.

The best moments at Livnot are connected by song. One night, in a cistern that remains from a twelfth century crusader citadel, a group of us sat around chatting until a street musician wandered in, sang, and played guitar for us. He filled the cistern first with slow, contemplative melodies, then upbeat songs we danced to (and on the way back, we followed the smell of bakery air to a pastry shop where a worker let us buy rugelach hot out of the oven at one in the morning). We explored a second century cave system in the Golan Heights that Jews used to hide from Romans for months at a time, and we turned off the lights to experience complete darkness and join voices in a round of Oseh Shalom. There were frequent renditions of songs from the Livnot songbook that gained special significance in intense moments, like the final mile of the three day long hike, when a sprained ankle forced us all to put our exhaustion aside and team up to ensure we all reached the Mediterranean Sea together. These musical moments of joy and connection will stick with me even longer than the tunes will stay stuck in my head.

Brene Brown writes, “Courage is to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart.” Livnot is the only place I’ve ever seen where everyone is doing that almost constantly. So much of the learning I’ve done here has come from listening to people around me, some of whom are very different from myself, and feeling very present to the even deeper things we have in common. The story of who I am now has an important chapter set in the rolling hills and Jerusalem stone-covered stairwells of Tzfat.
“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”

— Hebrews 12:1

Let us throw off everything that hinders,
the sin that so easily entangles.
Let us hang up the old ways,
the bullet and the blade,
the blunt return of old wrongs,
the bloody shirt waved and waving,
the blind resistance to pardon.
Let us disentangle this tangled world,
pry the bleating lamb from the thicket
and return it to pasture to grow,
release the thrush from among the thorns
to soar as a kite above us,
click open the cell door
and let our sisters and brothers
into the light.
Let us crown the lowly and step down from the throne—
oh, we such broken despots!
Let us be the eye that forever watches,
the ear that forever hears,
and the hands that this day build
the Kingdom of God on earth.
Religion is like a room full of naked women.

A month ago, I sat in a shallow tiled pool, trying to cover my nudity. The water was rose scented, on the threshold between scalding and “Holy Jesus!” Anonymity wasn’t enough; knees to chest, back to wall I was seeking invisibility.

I stared at my knees. I stared the ceiling. I stared at the water, the jets, the tiles, the sign that read “Water depth: 2’9”’ and tried to ignore the woman sitting across from me. I tried to ignore the feeling of the tiles acquainting themselves with my butt cheeks, exchanging first impressions. I tried to ignore the feeling of my breasts moving through the water as my chest rose and fell with every breath.

I was supposed to be relaxing, rejuvenating, rebalancing. I was scared.

We wear social norms the way we wear clothes – close to our bodies, as a thin shield from embarrassment and ridicule. Now social norms were lying in a crumbled pile beside my towel and I was scared.

They tell you everyone is unique, that no two fingerprints, minds, hands, bodies are alike. Then they hold up a single image and call it beautiful. Pin it on the wall above your head and deem it normal. Then, they dress you in clothes and say, ya, close enough. High waists and padded breasts, pleats and platform shoes. Ya, close enough. You look like a woman.
In a room full of naked women, there is no normal.

The woman sitting across from me stretched her legs out in front of her, her toes reaching towards me. I pulled my knees in closer to my chest. I tried and failed to ignore her breasts, so I focused on ignoring the fact that I couldn’t ignore her breasts. I stared at her and tried to control my expression.

She was running her hands slowly across the surface of the water, creating waves that lapped their way towards her chest. Her breasts hung down like water buckets off a yoke. They pulled her shoulders forward like a weight she had to bare, the water now sharing some of her burden. She was thin, her dark skin an even tone, her facial features strong but reassuring.

And I thought about gifts. How we insist on categorizing and compartmentalizing everything, criticizing or idealizing. How society tells us it’s an achievement to accept what you’ve been given.

Nineteen years, I stood in front of the mirror and stared at my body. Watched breasts grow, hair grow, hips grow, body fat come and go. I shaped my own concept of normal looking in that mirror. I wrote mental lists with mental checkmarks.

This woman’s breasts looked nothing like mine. Nor did those of the woman walking by, her breasts like two halves of a lemon, or her friend whose breasts rested like tired children on the folds of her stomach. The woman with nipples like babies’ thumbs.

Their bodies, our bodies, are like buildings of an ancient city. I understood then why God is the greatest architect. We strive to surround ourselves with constructed beauty, because we’re uncomfortable with the beauty that naturally surrounds us.

We stuff our breasts into bras like packages of uniformity. They tell us “firm but soft” “full but not too large”. The perfect breasts are with areolas.

I didn’t know the meaning of unique, individual, diverse, until it was standing, bare, in front of me. Their bodies, our bodies, are like buildings of an ancient city. I understood then why God is the greatest architect. We strive to surround ourselves with constructed beauty, because we’re uncomfortable with the beauty that naturally surrounds us.
CARNAL RAIN // JOCELYN KENNEDY

We are the rain—dirty, tainted from birth. Our sparkle dulled by the prince of air’s power lurking amidst the earth. Falling passionately in love with our own demise Maybe never to return to your hopeful skies. We are the carnal rain—Father, you are the righteous clouds.
The Land of a Thousand Hills, more like a million underestimated like the number of deaths, number of killers
Never have I seen a more beautiful country
Why is it only known for genocide and gorillas?
I'll give you more
The views, dancing till 4 in the morning, hugs that accompany a reminder that God is within me, full stomachs, hospitality, laughing, family.

Sometimes it’s too beautiful
I feel like an intruder, invading, taking
My eyes boring into their skulls, their bones, their clothes, their last moments
I’m so conflicted – shouldn’t these bodies be buried with love and respect? Instead of being preserved in the final moment of extermination – legs splayed open. Why keep her in this moment forever, robbing her of whatever agency she has left? She was raped once. Are we violating her again?

Again, I feel like an intruder. I look at my white skin and I know the privilege I carry. I feel the weight of the guilt of those like me, with the same skin, who stood by as blood was shed.

So many people with open hands, giving so much. Opening their mouths and telling me their stories. Trusting me with their stories. God, show me how I can give back, and how I can receive.

I’m haunted by the word “sanctuary”
Mother Mary serenely looking down at piles of clothes, bones, baby bags, and blankets.
What did she see on that night in 1994?
How could she stand there as the first grenades hit and the thousands within this “sanctuary” began to fall?
But maybe she was there, and that was enough. This statue representing a God who was with his people even under fire, under guns, under machetes.
Mother Mary praying over her people, staying with them to the end, even to this day, watching over their remains. It’s still a sanctuary, although I don’t dare call it safe. But I guess our God himself never claimed to be safe. It’s a holy place, made even more so by the deaths of these heroes.

I can’t forget the pictures, face after face, so happy. I want to know the stories of these strangers – their talents, hobbies, jobs, dreams, and loves. They seem so far away. I wish I knew more about their lives, instead of only the manner of their death: machete, gun, smashed against a wall, buried alive, GENOCIDE. It could have been me. It could have been my family portrait on the wall. It could have been our stories that people were guessing at, filled with more questions than answers.


Everything is wrong about this. I’m hyper aware of my feelings and my presences in these graves, crafting a profound response, pretending I have answers to the questions whispered here. The same ugliness is in me. The same fragility and desperation. Drop the academics and wise answers and just be, Isabel! Dwell on this connection. Their bones. Your bones.

“If you knew me and you truly knew yourself, you would not have killed me.”
And I do not know what to tell you. We coalesce in different countries.

You—the country of normalcy, where bodies can be fixed, each mind a gleaming, stable sand dune. I remember—I, too, was born into an existence with false walls.

Your mind is an ancient landscape, ridges smoothed-over and valleys filled in. Coming upon my body, a country newly formed by the collision of tectonic plates—you can only imagine the equipment necessary to traverse such canyons.

You want only to rescue me.

But I—welcomed into the disabled country, body built in the history of asylums, a pock-marked and iced-over hull smashed against an unseen switch; I fell into my own country, and I was terrified for a long time, but finally I was in my own country. I have not been abandoned. Do not tell me that I have gained nothing in my wanderings; pain is an intertwining conduit that led me to God.

Even in the jagged underpinnings of my deepest ravines, I am in my own country.
I do not know when the Kingdom is coming.

I have not heard its anthem sung - the hymn songs of the steeple towers feel like lauding death tolls or lullabies to hum us back to forgetting

The streets are flooded shotgun revolution now the people and their cross fire killing God, Her children’s bones streaming like rivers.

God said to me once this world is so fragile, She wept and now we swim in Her grief, waxing and waning with the hours of gravity.

I wonder if we humans felt that moon tide pull on the heart if our tears could fill the caverns between us if we could dive in the baptismal font of one blood if we could sing repentance until the Kingdom flooded the streets alive with Her fragile heart weeping.