Oh, To See the Dawn

An Honors Thesis HONRS 499

by

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Oh, To See the Dawn

Artist Statement
Oh, To See the Dawn

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Katheryn Pourcho
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Abstract

This collection of six panels narrates the loss, triumph and ultimate beauty in spite of death. Ideas for the work formed during a camping trip in Rocky Mountain National Park. While hiking I encountered whole forests of dead ponderosa pine trees. The infestation of a tiny beetle has reduced the once green forest to a barren mountainside lined with skeletons. The experience conjured memories of my grandmother’s death. My paternal grandmother, Betty Pourcho, died at the age of sixty-seven from breast and ovarian cancers. Despite the trauma of her death, I witnessed the strength of her faith. I dedicate this work to her memory and triumph over death.

"Like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Holy Bible: New International Version, Psalm 1:3).
Acknowledgments

I thank the Blue Bottle for providing the opportunity to show this work. I thank Elizabeth Dalton for her great patience and guidance during the process of determining and writing the thesis. I thank David Hannon for his mentoring support and constructive criticism. To my dear friends who watched me discover this thesis and who encouraged me along the way, I offer my sincerest thanks. I give my love and gratitude to my faithful parents who endured bursts of artistic energy, provided a makeshift studio, and championed my cause. I attribute this work to the Lord who is the true God and source of eternal life.
My visual narrative begins with a six-foot depiction of a ponderosa pine tree. In Irish legend the pine tree symbolizes rebirth. The Celts used it in festivals welcoming the return of the sun and good weather. The invigorating scent of the resin and the bright white flame of the wood when burnt represented renewal, and the evergreen needles evoked eternal life (Mac Coitir, 114-119).

Villagers of Silesia, Poland, use the pine tree to celebrate the advent of spring. After drowning an effigy of Death in water, children decorate a small sapling and carry it door-to-door proclaiming rebirth. Christian theologian Martin Luther founded a similar tradition. Seeing a snow-covered pine glimmering in the snow, Luther was reminded of the day his savior was nailed to a tree that he might receive eternal life, which led to the tradition of Christmas trees (Mac Coitir, 114-119).

Sadly, many ponderosas of the Rocky Mountains no longer bear emerald needles. The infestation of a tiny beetle is rapidly draining the life and color from a once mighty forest. Blue-green needles flame into vivid orange before resigning to purple then grey. When all color has left, the skeleton stands naked. Whole sections of forest contain these pale and brittle corpses.
The decline of the ponderosa pine forest parallels my paternal grandmother’s fight against cancer. Betty Pourcho died April 3, 2003, at the age of sixty-seven. Cancer had infiltrated her body. Its battle plan eluded doctors by performing merciless guerilla attacks for two years. It destroyed lymph nodes, tissue, and organs; yet, for all its brutality it could not overcome Betty’s hope. She trusted in what was to come. Betty’s faith rested in the eternal.

She accepted that her skin was a mere tent. Like the flaming orange needles of the pine tree, the cancer revealed her true colors. Betty battled to retain her tent, but when finally the last peg was pulled and her tent was nothing more than a tattered sheet, Betty rose triumphantly to meet her savior.

This collection of six panels narrates the loss, triumph, and ultimate beauty in spite of death. Scripture and hymns inspired titles of the work.* The first three titles are taken directly from the New Testament. The passage found in II Corinthians explains the bitter mortality of humankind; “For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened” (Holy Bible: New International Version, II Corinthians 5:4). These panels set the scene. They provide snapshots—as if the viewer is seeing through the eyes of the figure in panels four and five.

After the setting is established and the problem is introduced, the drama reaches its climax. The final three titles are derived from hymns. I closely associate hymns with my grandmother. I remember standing next to her as she sang the chorus from “It is Well.” At that point, she was in the thick of the battle with cancer. Months later I hummed this chorus to myself in the same church with my tearful family members beside me.

The series title, “Oh, To See the Dawn,” is taken from the modern hymn, “The Power of the Cross.” The verses mirror the narrative I tell. “Oh, to see the dawn of the darkest day,” the first verse begins (Townend and Getty 232). In the next lines, hymn writers Keith Getty and Stuart Townend record the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The hymn portrays the incredible juxtaposition of the most hopeless day and the most hopeful day.

* Referenced scripture and hymns are paired with work at the end of this document.
Ideas for the project were formulated during my travels last summer. Duomo walls and damp, Roman catacombs bearing early Christian frescos taught me traditions of narrating the faith. A camping trip in Rocky Mountain National Park evoked memories I had long since hidden. The summer brought a whirlwind of contemplation that led to the six-paneled narration entitled, *Oh, To See the Dawn*.

The panels, intended to be viewed from left to right, visually tell the story of the beauty found amidst death. The collection follows in the footsteps of artists such as Masaccio who depicted scenes of faith in narrative form. Throughout Church history artists have been commissioned and inspired to visually tell the story of the Gospel and heroes of the faith. When I toured the Catacombs of San Callisto I learned the variety of symbols that depicted the Christian faith, such as the phoenix that represented Christ's resurrection.
I chose to use symbolism when recording the story of my grandmother’s life and death. The number six holds Christian significance as God created Adam and Eve on the sixth day. I chose to make the first and last panels exactly 5’6” high accommodating the Ponderosa Pine depicted at approximately 5’2,” the height of my grandmother.

In addition to Church history, my work references artists such as Andrew Wyeth, David Wiesner, and Thomas Hart Benton. I favor these artists for their ability to tell stories using allegory and continuous narrative. When researching ways to tackle matting and framing, I looked to Walton Ford whose enormous watercolors have influenced my work in both size and frame.

From my first sketches to the final frames, I contemplated the nature of creation. Aristotle viewed creation as a purely intellectual process. The artist controls the form and imposes her idea using the medium. Plato argued that creation relied on inspiration. The process takes possession of the artist and the media controls her actions. As an artist, I can attest the dual nature of the creative process (Levi and Smith 36-53).

Initially, I confirmed the choice of media: watercolor and graphite. I established six specific compositions and formulated the narrative titles. As I continued to work I struggled to fully express all that I intended. No matter how I manipulated the medium I feared the pigment’s permanent and unforgiving nature. I protested against resorting to gouache (an opaque water-based paint), thinking its use too greatly resembled a white flag. Still, I didn’t have the patience to layer stroke upon stroke and wash upon wash. Without the patience, I couldn’t to fully immerse myself. I was a frustrated, impatient perfectionist.

Surrendering, I decided that mixing mediums enabled me to give and take. I could essentially sculpt the paper. I could think and revise. As I introduced each new medium—gouache, pastel, and color pencil—I let the medium speak for itself. I used the particular strengths of each to push the boundary of the paper itself. I enabled the medium to run to the point of chaos. I found that allowing the minerals and pigments to react according to their specific physical characteristics triggered beautiful outcomes. I found this to work successfully in Some Bright Morning. After laying down a wash of color I could let my brush drip water or more pigment onto the area and watch the pigment bloom and blend. At last I could balance each medium’s nature and my intent.

Experimenting led to a number of failures. Two panels, We Groan and And Are Burdened, required three attempts. I spent hours painting each attempt. The original We Groan composition depicted the fiery orange tops of the dying pine trees against a stormy sky. The composition of And Are Burdened started off as a landscape of distant mountains. In the end, I made the decision to exclude these panels entirely and design two entirely new compositions that provided a more concise visual flow. In fact, only two, We Are In This Tent and Turn Your Eyes, of the original six compositions remained similar to my preliminary drawings.

While the compositions evolved, my intent remained steadfast. I believe my experiments, failures, and revisions only strengthened my purpose. In speaking to a friend of my process, I was told of a study taken of two collegiate art classes. The first class was given the entire semester to create the highest quality drawing. The second was told to create as many drawings as they possibly could in an entire semester. At semester’s end, the students required to create the highest quantity also produced greater quality of work (Bayles and Orland 29-32).
Just as quality cannot be had without a previous quantity, the Aristotelian and Platonic must exist simultaneously. The creative process, however structured and theorized, must be inspired by the event of creation. During this project I discovered that my art education degree requires me to straddle the border line between artist and educator.

It is nearly impossible for me to transition from immersing myself in a project as an artist to summarizing the artistic methods as a teacher. Swimming from the depths of my artistic practice is a long, strenuous process. It takes me a while to catch my breath and get acclimated to the academic environment. I recognized this struggle when attempting to document my artistic method. The teacher-side of me wanted to document the process in order to demonstrate my methods. Photographing my work after a period of time, however, required me to stop my one-track mind. The stopping and starting caused me to lose concentration. Unfortunately, the work I began with ended up not making the final cut.

Throughout college I struggled to fit into both the art world and the world of education. Journeying into one meant leaving the other. The art teacher must be amphibious. The transition from studio to classroom must be seamless. I found that in order to maintain a seamless transition I had to stay in sight of the borderline. If I swam too deep or climbed too high, the harder the return journey became.
Student teaching this semester has taught me that the ability to dive deep and climb high requires the ability to build connections. Although I had planned on completing all six panels before student teaching, I did not finish the collection until three months into it. My weeks consisted of lesson planning, paperwork, and painting. The lack of time and sleep forced me to change roles on a dime. I found that both teacher and artist share a direct relationship. Developing as a teacher and strengthening skills as an artist will simultaneously increase my ability to perform the other.

After seven months contemplating and creating this narrative, the work was hung April 3, 2011, just eight years after my grandmother’s passing. I was thrilled to be given a space at the Blue Bottle in Muncie, IN, to display my work. Early on in the process I knew that I wanted to exhibit the work in an area with a lot of visibility. Although I would have been honored to show the work in a gallery, I knew that galleries do not see the weekly traffic that a coffee shop does. The Blue Bottle offered a space where the work would be seen and better communicate the testimony of my grandmother’s life and passing.

Photograph taken by Sarah Reese


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Artifacts

Exhibited at the Blue Bottle in Muncie, Indiana, April 2011.

The following artifacts include:
- Announcement Postcard
- Gallery Statement
- Images of work with provided explanation
- Photographs of work hung
The ponderosa pine of the Rocky Mountains no longer bears emerald needles. The infestation of a tiny beetle is rapidly draining the life and color from a once mighty forest. Blue, green needles flame into vivid orange before resigning to fade to purple then grey. When all color has left, the skeleton stands naked. Whole sections of forest contain these pale and brittle corpses.

My paternal grandmother, Betty Pourcho, died April 3, 2003. Cancer had infiltrated her body. It’s battle plan eluded doctors by performing merciless guerilla attacks for two years. It destroyed lymph nodes, tissue and organs; yet, for all its brutality it could not overcome Betty’s hope. She trusted in what was to come. Betty’s faith rested in the eternal.

She accepted that her skin was a mere tent. Like the flaming orange needles of the pine tree, the cancer revealed her true colors. Betty battled to regain her tent, but when finally the last peg was pulled and her tent was nothing more than a tattered sheet, Betty rose triumphantly to meet her savior.

The collection of paintings consists of six panels intentionally designed to compose a visual narrative. The six panels, viewed from left to right, visually tell the story of what I believe is the beauty found amidst death. I chose to make the first and last panels exactly 5'6" high with the Ponderosa Pine depicted at approximately 5'2," the height of my grandmother.

I used the particular strengths of each medium—gouache, pastel, and color pencil—to push the boundary of the paper itself. I allowed the medium to run to the point of chaos. I found that by enabling the minerals and pigments to react according to their specific physical characteristics triggered beautiful outcomes.

My artistic references include Andrew Wyeth, David Wiesner, Masaccio, and Thomas Hart Benton. This project follows in the footsteps of artists like Masaccio who depicted scenes of faith in narrative form. Throughout Church history artists have been commissioned and inspired to visually tell the story of the Gospel and heroes of the faith.

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"Like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" 

Psalm 1:3
Oh, To See the Dawn

Katheryn Pourcho | Ball State University Honors College
Senior Thesis

Betty Lila Pourcho
September 3, 1932-April 3, 2003
"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, and eternal house to heaven, not built by human hands."

II Corinthians 5:1
NIV
"Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

II Corinthians 5:2-4
NIV
Turn Your Eyes

O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!

Refrain:
Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely
dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Through death into life everlasting
He passed, and we follow Him there;
O'er us sin no more hath dominion—
For more than conqu'rors we are!

His Word shall not fail you—He promised;
Believe Him, and all will be well:
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell!

Helen Lemmel
1922
In the Sweet By and By

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

Refrain:
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

We shall sing on that beautiful shore
The melodious songs of the blessed;
And our spirits shall sorrow no more,
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.
To our bountiful Father above,
We will offer our tribute of praise
For the glorious gift of His love
And the blessings that hallow our days.

Sanford F. Bennet
1868
I'll Fly Away

Some bright morning, when this life is over
I'll fly away
To that home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away

Refrain:
I'll fly away
I'll fly away, Oh Glory
I'll fly away, in the morning
When I die, hallelujah by and by

I'll fly away
When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away
Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly
I'll fly away
Oh how glad and happy when we meet
I'll fly away
Now more cold iron shackles on my feet
I'll fly away
Just a few more weary days and then
I'll fly away
To a land where joys will never end

Albert E. Brumley
1929
The image above shows the work hanging at The Blue Bottle. The work was hung April 3, 2011, eight years after Betty Pourcho's passing.
The Power of the Cross

Oh, to see the dawn
Of the darkest day:
Christ on the road to Calvary.
Tried by sinful men,
Torn and beaten, then
Nailed to a cross of wood.

Chorus:
This, the pow’r of the cross:
Christ became sin for us;
Took the blame, bore the wrath—
We stand forgiven at the cross.

Oh, to see the pain
Written on Your face,
Bearing the awesome weight of sin.
Ev’ry bitter thought,
Ev’ry evil deed
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.

Now the daylight flees;
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.
Curtain torn in two,
Dead are raised to life;
“Finished!” the vict’ry cry.

Oh, to see my name
Written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering I am free.
Death is crushed to death;
Life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.

Final Chorus:
This, the pow’r of the cross:
Son of God—slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.

Stewart Townend and Keith Getty
2005
Oh, to see the Dawn

Katheryn Pourcho Honors Thesis Exhibition
Katheryn Pourcho  
Ball State University Honor's College

**Oh, to see the Dawn**  
Honors Thesis Exhibition  
Six watercolor and mix media panels narrating the beauty found in dying.

Opening April 7, 5-8pm  
The Blue Bottle  
206 South Walnut Street  
Muncie, IN