



THE CROSSING
DONALD NALLY

BORN

EDIE HILL
MICHAEL GILBERTSON

Navona

BORN

music by Michael Gilbertson
words by Wislawa Szymborska

*Commissioned for The Crossing by
Steven Hyder and Donald Nally
In memory of Margaret Martindale
Nally (July 14, 1926 – December
31, 2016)*

So this is his mother.
This small woman.
The gray-eyed procreator.

The boat in which, years ago,
he sailed to shore.

The boat from which he stepped
into the world,
into un-eternity.

Genetrix of the man
with whom I leap through fire.

So this is she, the only one
who didn't take him
finished and complete.

She herself pulled him
into the skin I know,
bound him to the bones
that are hidden from me.

She herself raised
the gray eyes
that he raised to me.

So this is she, his Alpha.
Why has he shown her to me.

Born.
So he was born, too.
Born like everyone else.
Like me, who will die.

The son of an actual woman.
A new arrival from the body's
depths.
A voyager to Omega

Subject to
his own absence,
on every front,
at any moment.

He hits his head
against a wall
that won't give way forever.

His movements
dodge and parry
the universal verdict.

I realized
that his journey was already
halfway over.

But he didn't tell me that,
no.

"This is my mother."
was all he said.

—from *No End of Fun* (1967)
Wislawa Szymborska (1923-2012),
trans. by Stanislaw Baranczak
and Clare Cavanagh

SPECTRAL SPIRITS

music by Edie Hill
words by Holly J. Hughes, Henry
David Thoreau, Gert Goebel,
Christopher Cokinos, Lucien M.
Turner, Paul A. Johnsgard, and
Alexander Wilson

*Spectral Spirits was commissioned by
The Crossing and Donald Nally with
generous support provided by John
Hawthorn and Danielle Macbeth.*

a note from the composer:

When Donald Nally asked "are there any texts you've been dying to set?" I immediately thought of *Passings* by Holly J. Hughes. *Passings* was out on a display table at a favorite local bookstore. I picked it up because there was a feather on the cover – and because of the title. I had a feeling I knew what the subject matter would be. When I read, I was drawn in by Holly's masterful poetry. Each of the 15 poems in her book lovingly tell the story of birds who are highly endangered, extinct, or believed to be gone. This book sat on a table in my living room for a couple of years. I thought maybe, someday, the opportunity would come for me to set some of these gems, and it did in the form of a commission for *The Crossing*.

Donald said "I like long pieces" and so, I chose four of Holly's

poems to set: "Passenger Pigeon," "Carolina Parakeet," "Eskimo Curlew," and "Ivory-Billed Woodpecker." Each of these birds lived in or migrated through or to North America. In addition to her poems, I found treasures in the *Forward of Passings* ("Take note. These birds are still singing to us. We must listen.") and in the books she references; such as *Hope is the Thing With Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos.

Having the space of 30 minutes was a luxury. I had room to play with form and to fashion a piece using Holly's poems as the "pillars" of four musical sequences, creating a ceremony honoring each of the four birds individually. The piece begins with a brief prelude: setting Holly's words from her *Forward*. Then, each sequence begins with an eyewitness account of what it was like to experience these birds firsthand, followed by what I call "The Naming," which states the formal Latin name as well as various "nicknames" given to each bird. "The Naming" is then followed by Holly's pillar poem.

For about a year, I was immersed in these poems and books by naturalists and ornithologists. I reread *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and articles about our ailing earth. Composing this piece was an emotional sequence of falling in love with a bird followed by grieving its loss.

Composing *Spectral Spirits* was as much a study of humans as it was of birds. I found myself asking how human beings managed to obliterate these species. In some cases, populations were brought back from the brink of extinction only to be brought down again. A false sense of security, perhaps. Human beings take things for granted and forget. Why, if we see something alive, vibrant, with striking color, do we want to possess it to the point of oblivion? Why is it permissible to destroy nature in the name of "progress" or financial gain? In the end: we all lose.

I grieve every day for the state of our planet and her creatures. Composing *Spectral Spirits* was a gift that gave me a chance to funnel this grief. It allowed me to celebrate the creatures we've lost. And, it was an impetus to look out for the ones that still appear in the treetops.

Prelude: These Birds

Take note. These birds are still singing to us. We must listen.
— Holly J. Hughes

Passenger Pigeon

Eyewitness: Henry David Thoreau and the Passenger Pigeon (tenor solo with choir)

"Blue...dry slate...blue, like weather stained wood...a more subdued and earthy blue than sky...a fit

color for this airiel traveller as its path is between sky and earth."
— Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), American author and naturalist, adapted by the composer from *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos (b. 1963)

The Naming (alto solo)
Echttopistes migratorius.
Wandering wanderer.

Passenger Pigeon

from the painting by James J. Audubon, 1824. On Sept. 1, 1914, Martha, the last passenger pigeon, died in the Cincinnati Zoo.

See how she bends to him, her beak held within his while she waits for his food to rise up to her hunger.

He rests on the arcing branch, his neck a perfect answer to hers, wings held aloft and slightly splayed while long tail feathers stream

away, Prussian blue going to dusk, breast russet, branch below studded with viridian lichen to match his coat, colors chosen

by Audubon as he painted them in courtship *in situ*. See how her colors foreshadow the fall—dun, mustard, black—

how her tail balances his wings painted in parallel planes,

how the drooping oak leaf holds them in place, stasis

in which they are aware of no one but each other.

Audubon captured them in gouache, graphite, and pastels,

not knowing they would soon be gone; in his time they were more numerous than all other species combined.

They say the pigeons flew over the banks of the Ohio River for three days in succession, sounding like a hard gale at sea.

Years later, guns spattered shot into skies stormy with pigeons. Thousands plummeted, filling railroad cars bound for fine restaurants.

Now, of those hundreds of millions that once darkened the skies, we are left with Martha, who never lived in the wild,

stuffed in the Smithsonian, Prussian-blue feathers stiff, glass eyes staring, waiting, still, for her mate. — Holly J. Hughes

Carolina Parakeet
Eyewitness: Gert Goebel and the Paroquets (baritone solo)

“In winter...flocks of paroquets were a real ornament to the trees stripped of their foliage...a flock of several hundred...settled on a big sycamore...the bright green color

of the birds...the many yellow heads looked like many candles. [In Germany] a young birch... was set in a pail of water. In the warm room it produced delicate leaves...and on Christmas Eve, was decorated with gilded and silvered nuts, apples and candies, not unlike these bird-covered tree tops, these enormous Christmas trees of the forest.”— Gert Goebel (1816-1896), German settler in eastern Missouri, from a translation of his 1877 autobiography, adapted by the composer from *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos

The Naming (alto solo)
Puzzi la neć. Head of yellow. Conuropsis carolinensis.

Carolina Parakeet
Incas, the last Carolina parakeet, died in his cage at the Cincinnati Zoo on Feb. 21, 1918, only six months after the death of Lady Jane, his companion of thirty-two years.

From Mexico to New York they flew, tail feathers streaming, starting in the monochrome of winter's eastern shore.

When their forests were cut, they swooped to the farmlands in waves of color—yellow, green, orange—lit in fruit trees,

found the soft squish of peaches, cherries, figs. Descending

three hundred at a time, in crayon-box flocks, they were shot

by farmers defending their crops—who could fault them? Shot for their tail feathers, all the rage on ladies' hats,

shot because they would not desert each other, each staying by its wonderful mate until hunters picked them off,

one by each last, bright, exotic, faithful one. — Holly J. Hughes

Eskimo Curlew
Eyewitness: Lucinen M. Turner and the Migration of the Curlews (soprano solo with choir)

“The calls of a distant flock... sound like the wind whistling through a ship's rigging or the jingling of countless sleigh bells.” — an observer

“A most graceful undulation...like a cloud of smoke wafted by the lightest zephyr.

The whirl and rise...(Their) aerial evolutions (are) one of the most wonderful in the flight of birds.”

— Lucien M. Turner (1848-1909), American ethnologist and naturalist, adapted by the composer from “Where Have All the Curlews Gone?” by Paul A. Johnsgard (b. 1931)

The Naming (alto solo)
Numenius borealis. Sweetgrass.

Swiftwing. Little Sicklebill.

Eskimo Curlew

I grew up reading *The Last of the Curlews* before bed, your crescent-moon beak beckoning me north.

Even then you were almost gone, though millions of you once filled the skies, migrating from the northern tundra

to South America, feeding on grasshoppers along the way. Within twenty years, your vast flocks were brought down

by market hunters, fire suppression, tilling of the prairies, eradication of grasshoppers. Before hunting was banned,

two million curlews were killed each year. Here's the part that still makes me weep:

You were wiped out because you stayed by your fallen companion; from you

I learned what loyalty means. Today, birders

search for you along Galveston's shore,

sometimes catch a glimpse, memory being so strong.

No one knows for sure you're gone. You live on

in the pages of a book, a waning crescent moon.

—Holly J. Hughes

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker
Eyewitness: Mr. Wilson and the Ivory-Bill (baritone solo)

“The first place I observed this bird...was twelve miles north of Wilmington...North Carolina.

There I found the bird from which my drawing was taken.

While engaged in taking the drawing, he cut me severely in several places...on the whole, displayed such a noble and unconquerable spirit, that I was frequently tempted to restore him to his native woods. He lived with me nearly three days, but refused all sustenance, and I witnessed his death with regret.”

— Alexander Wilson (1766-1813)

Scottish-American poet and ornithologist, 1811, adapted by the composer from *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos

The Naming (alto solo)

Campephilus principalis. Principal lover of grubs. Splendid recluse of the swamp.

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker
I wish I'd been at the sighting that

inspired its nickname, the Lord God bird. I'd love to see this woodpecker,

perhaps extinct, perhaps not; no one knows for sure. Standing twenty inches tall with white wing patches

and a flashy red crest, who wouldn't say *Lord God, look at that?* Once it made its home in the hardwood

forests of the south; birders say its ivory bill could pierce bark eight inches deep. Imagine the racket. Even so,

they were vulnerable: a single pair needed six square miles of wet forest with dead trees in which to search for grubs.

In 1948, when a Louisiana forest was cleared for a soy plantation, the last population vanished. The Cuban subspecies survived

a few more decades, but by 1970, logging had reduced its population to eight pairs. In the 1990s, explorers in the mountains near Moa

found fresh signs of feeding, caught a glimpse of a bird that may have been the ivory bill, but that

sighting was never confirmed.

Since then, more reports have surfaced, suggesting
the Lord God bird may not be gone. A few still hide,
spectral spirits, reminding us of the shimmering line
linking memory and desire, reminding us that perhaps
it's not too late to save them, to save us all.
— Holly J. Hughes

RETURNING

music by Michael Gilbertson
words by Kai Hoffman-Krull

a note from the poet:

Returning explores the story of David and Jonathan from the Hebrew Bible in the form of an unspoken conversation between them. Jonathan's words to David are spoken internally as he prepares to fight the Philistines at Mt. Gilboa. David's words are spoken to Jonathan's memory after his passing at the battle. A third, omniscient voice reflects on the nature of love.

Part I.

What knits us
to the soul of another
the way dusk light becomes
a part of dankness returning

What connects us to a life
more than our own

What makes us choose

Night pours into sky
like the first rains
in a riverbed
colors of stone
made true by water

(David)

Your voice speaks now
as it spoke before
though what I hear more
the space between words
your breath preparing for sound

(Jonathan)

I think of what I forget
the slipping image of your hand
the rivers in your fingers formed
by the waters of use
currents carrying me towards you

Night pours into sky
like the first rains
in a riverbed
colors of stone
made true by water

If I speak to you now
could you hear
for the air around me
is like your nearness

You were always the wilderness
taste of the unknown berry
colors etched in my lips
foliage lush without water

What makes us choose

How many kinds of light
live in a night sky

Is light ever separate
from the time
it travels through

What connects to a life
more than our own

Part II.

Air that night
like the colors of stone
made true by water

If I had not asked you to speak
a lie

would you still be alive

or a part of the silence
we come to know

Are you dead
because of my life

I thought of staying quiet
the night of the full moon

Before I spoke that night
I knew my father
would curse

Why are there words
I cannot speak to your face
but only to your memory

I thought of staying quiet
the night of the full moon

For a moment
my silence
became my reign

Would you have ruled
better than I

Tonight I look at the sky
and cannot find
the space between light and dark

What knits us
to the soul of another
the way dusk light becomes
a part of darkness returning

For a moment
my quiet
spoke king

For a moment
I let you die

Tonight I look at the sky
the space between light and dark
how the edge of one
becomes the edges of the other



Donald Nally conducts *The Crossing*, the internationally acclaimed, GRAMMY-award-winning professional choir that commissions, premieres, and records only new music. He holds the John W. Beattie Chair of Music at Northwestern University where he is professor and director of choral organizations. Nally has served as chorus master at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Welsh National Opera, Opera Philadelphia, and for many seasons at the Spoleto Festival in Italy. Nally has commissioned over 140 works. He received the 2017 Michael Korn Founders Award from Chorus America; his ensembles have twice received the Margaret

Hillis Award for Excellence in Choral Music. Nally has worked closely with the artists Allora & Calzadilla and composer David Lang on projects in London, Osaka, Cleveland, Edmonton, Cordoba, and Philadelphia. Recent highlights include his role as visiting resident artist at the Park Avenue Armory, music director for the world premiere of Lang's the mile-long opera – directing 1000 voices on the High Line in Manhattan, chorus master for the New York Philharmonic for world premieres by Lang and Julia Wolfe, and guest conducting works he has commissioned with the Swedish Radio Choir.



The works of **Michael Gilbertson** have been described as “elegant” and “particularly beautiful” by *The New York Times*, “vivid, tightly woven” and “delectably subtle” by the *Baltimore Sun*, “genuinely moving” by the *Washington Post*, and “a compelling fusion of new and ancient” by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Gilbertson is the BMI Composer in Residence with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra and is a professor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He was a finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Music for his *Quartet*. Gilbertson holds degrees from The Juilliard School and Yale University. His works have been programmed by

orchestras including the Minnesota Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, Washington National Opera, Albany Symphony, New World Symphony, Cabrillo Festival Orchestra, Grand Rapids Symphony, Santa Barbara Symphony, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, Symphony in C, wind ensembles including The United States Marine Band, and choirs including Musica Sacra, *The Crossing*, and *Conspirare*. Gilbertson's work has earned awards including a Lieberson Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Copland House Residency Award, five Morton Gould

Awards from ASCAP, and a BMI Student Composer Award. In March, 2016, he was *MusicalAmerica Magazine's* featured Artist of the Month. His opera *Breaking*, a collaboration with playwright Caroline McGraw, was commissioned by the Washington National Opera and premiered at The Kennedy Center in November, 2013. He has twice composed and conducted ballets for the New York City Ballet's Choreographic Institute and his fifth ballet, a collaboration with choreographer Norbert De La Cruz, was premiered by the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in July 2013. Gilbertson serves as artistic director of an annual music festival, ChamberFest Dubuque, which he founded in 2009 to raise money for a community school in his hometown of Dubuque IA.



For **Edie Hill**, writing music is an opportunity to research, learn, muse, reach down deep, and allow inspiration to come from the stuff of life. Her compositions are fueled by her experiences, passions, and curiosities. Born in New York City in 1962, Hill's love for making music was encouraged by her parents. Her dyslectic, difficult grade school days were eased by coming home to the piano to improvise/compose for hours on end. After earning a B.A. from Bennington College under the tutelage of Vivian Fine, Hill moved to Minneapolis earning M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Minnesota with Lloyd Ultan. She also studied

extensively with Libby Larsen. Her works have been performed worldwide at venues including Lincoln Center, LA County Museum of Art, Library of Congress, Minneapolis' Walker Arts Center, St. Paul's Schubert Club, The Cape May Festival (NJ), The Met Cloisters (NYC), Annenberg Center Live Series (Philadelphia, PA) and concert halls in Eastern and Western Europe, Thailand, Iceland, Russia, Brazil, Great Britain, New Zealand, and The United Arab Emirates. Her music has earned her three McKnight Artist Fellowships, two Bush Artist Fellowships and grants/awards from the Jerome Foundation, ASCAP, New Music USA, Meet The Composer, the Minnesota State Arts Board, and Chamber Music America. She has been commissioned to compose for everything from solo flute to mass band; from art song to large choral works. She was Composer in Residence at Schubert Club from 2005-2017 where she ran and grew the Mentorship Program for high school composers. She was Composer Mentor for MN Varsity for composers 14-18 years of age co-sponsored by The American Composers Forum and Classical Minnesota Public Radio. She has lectured at colleges, universities, and various institutions in the United States and abroad. Her music is available from Hummingbird Press. www.ediehill.com

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR:

Our artists, composers, audience, friends, and supporters; Edie Hill and Michael Gilbertson; the staff and congregation at our home, The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill; those who opened their homes to our artists during the recording of *Born: music of Edie Hill and Michael Gilbertson*: David and Rebecca Thornburgh, Becky Siler, Katy Avery and Thann Scoggin, Taylor and Frank Slaughter, Corbin Abernathy and Andrew Beck, Daniel Schwartz and Mike Rowley.

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