



Chrysalis

Volume 17 Fall 2020

*Journal of
The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World*

“The wisdom of women is to join the knowing of the body to that of mind, to join soul to spirit, intuition to reasoning, feeling consciousness to intellectual analysis, intimacy to detachment, subjective presence to objective distance. When these functions become separated in carrying out the human project then the way into the future is to bring them together.”¹

~ Thomas Berry

Dear Reader,

In our last issue of *Chrysalis*, we began a series devoted to Thomas Berry’s call to “reflect that a fourfold wisdom is available to guide us into the future: the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of classical traditions and the wisdom of science.”² Shortly after the issue was mailed, the world was brought into a global pandemic and a consequent call to “shelter in place” and “stay at home,” an historic moment in time when the suffering, compassion, intimacy and communion of the whole Earth community have never been more visible on a global level. In the midst of this moment, we devote the fall issue of *Chrysalis* to the Wisdom of Women.

While Thomas deeply acknowledged the contributions of women to environmental work – women like Rachel Carson, Barbara McClintock and the extensive contributions of women religious in the twentieth century – he also recognized an imaginal dimension of the feminine that begins in communion with Earth as a mode of divine presence, is sanctified in love, and is expressed in a spontaneous creativity – what Cynthia Bourgeault refers to as the alchemical feminine “that is present, intimate, creative, ‘closer than your own heartbeat,’ accessed through your vulnerability, your capacity for intimacy.”³

¹Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 180.

²Ibid., 176.

³Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston: Shambala, 2010), 218-219.



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Wood Engraving by Ilya Schor

EDITOR: Peggy Whalen-Levitt

DESIGN: Peggy Whalen-Levitt

LAYOUT: Arrowhead Graphics

PRINTING: Arrowhead Graphics

By becoming a Friend of the Center, you receive two copies of
Chrysalis a year.

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World
is a non-profit organization recognized as tax-exempt by the
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Entering this dimension of the feminine, we move beyond our ordinary relationship to space and time into the depth of the imaginal. Thomas understood this deeply, especially in regard to children:

“The sacred and the profound are best expressed through analogous language. Language creates reality. The idea is that we know more than we can explain. A mother cannot rationally explain her love for her child. Their mutual fulfillment lies in their capacity for intimacy with each other; there is no scientific explanation for this. The relationship is self-authenticated and self-explanatory. There is the science of it, but that is not what a mother is feeling or talking about...Young people need this kind of world. If they get into a computer world too soon, they are deprived of the world they should be experiencing. We are not going to recover our ecology until we understand this.”⁴

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas speaks of the richness of earlier matricentric cultures that need reconsideration today “for the contributions they make to our understanding of the universe in its deeper modes of functioning...In their symbolic modes of expression, especially, they enable us to go beyond the rational processes...Through these traditions we have recovered our understanding of the archetypal world of the unconscious.”⁵

Thomas speaks most deeply of the Wisdom of Women in a lesser known essay he wrote entitled “Women Religious: Voices of Earth,” where he writes:

“Earth was born of divine love and will survive only through our human love.”⁶

⁴Quoted in Jessica Towle, “Conversations with Thomas Berry,” in *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peggy Whalen-Levitt (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), 10.

⁵Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 145.

⁶Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 71.

He goes on to say that women “are attuned to the voices of Earth in a way especially needed as we move into a future less dominated by the plundering processes of the industrial nations. Women may help us recover our reverence for natural manifestations of the divine world around us...Acceptance of intimacy with the Earth is a condition for transcending the mechanistic life attitude that dominates the modern world. It is also a condition for entering into the poetry of existence, for composing music, for creating the visual arts. In all these areas the inner form of things is experienced in and through their physical reality. This inner form is the voice listened for and heard when we become present to Earth in some significant manner. Only if Earth is perceived as precious, only if there is a profound intimacy with the inner self, the inner spontaneities of nature, will we have the will or the psychic energy to bring about the difficult transformation in human life required of us.”⁷



“Child of the Universe” by Mary Southard

At the Center, we have embraced the *alchemical feminine* in our work with educators and children. Beginning with stillness, presence and an intimacy of communion with the natural world, our work recognizes and makes space for an inner dimension of reality, a relational dimension of the soul, and an intuitive dimension of knowing.

This issue of *Chrysalis* brings you deeply into the wisdom of three women who have graduated from our Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program:

⁷ Ibid., 79-80.

~ Joanne Rothstein has been in daily intimate presence with Grandmother Lake for many years. In “A Moment of Grace,” she describes a moment of mutual recognition born of these years of devoted presence.

~ In “Learning to Converse,” Margery Knott enters the subtlety and reciprocity of intimate conversation with Earth.

~ Elizabeth Carrington’s work is twofold. First, she takes us deeply into the Wisdom of Women through symbolic modes of expression that reawaken the Celtic feminine, the image of the rose, and the enchanted forest. Second, she leads her high school students at the School of Living Arts into eco-contemplative practices that weave into a poem, “We Are Earth.”

The feminine works most deeply at the unconscious level, where the qualitative transformation of human nature and consciousness begins. This, I believe, is what Thomas Berry meant when he said: “Only if Earth is perceived as precious, only if there is a profound intimacy with the inner self, the inner spontaneities of nature, will we have the will or the psychic energy to bring about the difficult transformation in human life required of us.”⁸

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peggy Whalen-Levitt".

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director

⁸ Ibid.

A Moment of Grace

by

Joanne Rothstein

February 26, 2015

4:30 interfaces dark and dawn. It's a magical time. This morning finds me clunking down the street in my Sorrell's, now accessorized with metal cleats to better grip the endless snow and ice. Wrapped in multiple layers of wool and further plumped by an over-sized down jacket, it's more I waddle toward my morning rendezvous with Grandmother Lake. My metamorphosis makes me chuckle.

Fortunate for the water fowl, the edge of the lake has resisted the confines of ice and still offers a watery retreat. A variety of birds drift in these waters early morning, hiding themselves from view as best they can behind the shrubs and woody wildness at the beach's edge. Mergansers, coots, mallards, the resident Canadian geese. In warm weather the squawk of the blue heron heralds my arrival disrupting the local peace and tranquility. Then the outrage at being disturbed is taken up by the ducks and geese. And so begins the splashing and fluttering of wings which eventually calms to a peaceful coexistence for those that decide to remain. Given the frigid temperatures of winter, the birds find it an adequate response to drift in silence further away from view.

I tried not to take it personally. For awhile I imagined their angry sounding outbursts and hasty retreats were in reality an enthusiastic welcome, with winged messengers dispatched to spread the welcomed words "*our friend Joanne has arrived.*" Somehow it evolved to my silently just cooing words of reassurance to them as I approach the water each morning.

Today I did the same as I crunched through feet of crystalline snow and planted my plastic chair perch by the water's edge. 8-10 Canadian geese shifted in their watery beds. I slowly wrapped myself in my fleece blanket and settled down for my visit.

Moments later, the geese, communicating in faint whispers, started to swim not away but toward me. Taken aback by their behavior I felt both thrilled and fearful. As the distance between us diminished, my fear increased as my mind tried to understand what was happening. At some point I realized they were probably experiencing their own fear. In silence they stepped from the water onto the sand, in silence their webbed feet gingerly navigated the snow. Then in silence they nestled down into the snow, at my feet. We communed in peace, in community together. I looked at the lead bird whose outstretched neck rested on the snow inches from my boots. It was a moment of deep reverence, a moment of wholeness. I realized in that moment that the bird had recognized and

was honoring my Divineness. This beautiful creature was showing me how to be in relationship, how to behold the Divine. I felt ashamed that I chose not to see and honor, whether in myself or others, that which the bird so clearly recognized. I wept in gratitude for this moment of seeing and being seen. These years of quiet solitude in company with Grandmother Lake, building relationship with the natural world, forging outward connection had led full circle to this one moment of mutual recognition of my beauty, grace and wonder.

Moments passed and then in silence the geese returned to the water and I inhaled deeply the ecstasy of the present.

Joanne Rothstein studied biology at the College of New Rochelle, after an early education catching frogs in her backyard vernal pond, and upon graduation embarked on a 25 year career in medical research at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. She has authored numerous scientific papers in the field of infectious disease and presented her work at national and international meetings. A personal exploration of alternative medicine led to a career shift and a Masters degree in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine from the New England School of Acupuncture. She has developed and taught a course on Five Elements – a Traditional Chinese medical approach to health based on the rhythms of the natural world, as adjunct faculty for Lesley University. As a SoulCollage facilitator, Joanne offers programs that use collage to explore heart connection with the natural world. For almost a decade, Joanne has engaged a morning practice of presence with Grandmother Lake near her home.

Learning to Converse

by

Margery Knott

A year ago, as I moved into the daily practice of Beholding, I wrote these words in my journal:

“During the early months of my practice, I focused on deep, sacred listening to the forest and its beings. Listening is perhaps the most fundamentally receptive — one might say, passive — of the senses. How different it is from our restlessly darting staring searching gaze, from our touching grasping busy hands. Slowly I learned to ‘listen’ with my whole self — not only with my ears, but also with my eyes and nose, skin and heart — wanting to hear what the natural world would volunteer to say when neither questioned directly nor bullied into relinquishing its secrets. Simply listening alertly, respectfully, lovingly — as at the feet of a wise elder — seemed the appropriate place for an adult of our all too often arrogant and domineering culture to start.

I knew, of course, that my animal kin — birds, deer, rabbits, coyote, bear — were also, in an overt way, listening and responding to my presence in the woods. But after a time, I became aware of some deeper, more comprehensive reciprocal listening intertwined with my own. And I began to understand that listening leads to conversation, and *conversation is interactive*. It is *mutual*. I remembered the theologian Nelle Morton’s wonderful phrase “hearing one another into speech.”¹ I felt that I was asked to appreciate my full role in the conversation. As a participant, I must bring not only my listening heart but also my unique voice...

“Mutual.” That is what it means to be a member of what Thomas Berry calls “a communion of subjects.” It is unmediated intimacy: that which I behold also beholds me, that which I come to know also knows me; that which I hear also hears me; that which I encourage to speak also encourages me to speak.

How can I refuse such a gentle invitation?”

* * * * *

What the forest said was “Speak.”

But what is the sound of my Voice? How shall I recognize it? What shall I say?

During the months that have followed these musings, I have begun to experiment with ways to converse with other-than-human members of the cosmic communion through the practices of awareness and co-creation.

¹ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

In the morning, I contemplate a small handmade bowl — thanking the potter and her teachers, the Earth which has offered the clay and glazes, the fire.

As I fill the bowl with water, I bring into my heart our local watershed and then move out to the whole planet — its seas and clouds, its rivers and springs, its trees breathing moisture from soil to air, its flowing currents of warmth and cold — and then out to our Sun who sets it all in motion.

I lift a brush — praying for the tree that gave wood for the handle and for its forest, praying for the hands that smoothed and shaped it to fit my hand and for their community, praying for the animals whose hairs have been gathered and shaped into a point and for all their kin.

I set out paint: Natural Gold Ochre and Hematite Burnt Scarlet. I feel my kinship with Earth, from which the colors have come, and with the ancestors whose ochre handprints embrace cave walls around the world. I feel the iron that in one form gives hematite its hue and that, in another, carries energy through my blood and the blood of myriad beings.

I rub my hands across the paper, noting its texture and tooth. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn has shown us how to see the whole cosmos in a piece of paper: sun, cloud, rain, tree, the man who cut down the tree, that man's family... Once again I let my awareness expand until it is enfolded in the great InterBeing.

At the same time that each constituent is a unique manifestation of its own story, all are participants in the one unity of being. I take time to appreciate and give thanks for both the differentiation and the interrelationships and communion.

Perhaps this is a morning when I am quiet and gentle. Slowly I bring the tip of the brush into contact with the water. I see the dimple it makes, like a finger pressed against skin, not breaking the surface. Perhaps I decide to respect the water's resistance and let it take control of this morning's conversation. I set the brush aside and spend a moment listening to what the surface tension of the water has to tell me today.

Or perhaps this morning I do not use the brush but sweep the pigment across the page with a pigeon feather I found in the street. I feel the blessing of the winged ones and bless them in return.

Or perhaps this is a morning when paint does not join the conversation. I dip the brush in clear water and move my hand in wide free swoops across the paper. I watch how the paper changes — brilliantly shining wet lines gradually dulling as the paper and air take the water into themselves. After a time, I can no longer see the design, but the water has not disappeared. It has been transformed through its intimate communion with paper and air, as the paper and air themselves have been changed by its presence. As I have been changed by this movement...

Or perhaps I plunge the brush into the water and watch the bristles expand and move away from each other as the water offers itself to their minute scales. I stroke the wet brush across the paint and then across the paper. The ochre moves in smooth unified lines. The hematite breaks into a thousand tiny granules. I let a single drop of water fall on a dot of hematite and watch as the dark iron particles move further away from each other and radiate in a sun-like circle beside the firm ochre. Another drop of water between the two and the pigments send tentative arms out to each other — to mingle or to repel. Some of the paint puddles in the subtle curve of the paper's edge.

When I look, I do not see “a painting” — certainly not “*my* painting.” I did not convene the gathering with a specific agenda nor demand that each participant speak only as designated by my script. Instead, we who have conversed — water, paint, paper, brush, and I — have responded to each other according to our natures, in a miniature version of the Great Conversation that is the emerging Universe. Looking at the map of this morning’s meditation, I can see how each voice has “activated” the others.² Looking more deeply, I can learn something about the individual character and voice of each participant. In the traces of my own movements and choices, I can at last begin to discern my own nature, to recognize my own voice.

The forest asked me, “Will you speak?”
What shall I speak?

My contemplation has led me deep into the tapestry of being whose threads are intricately and inextricably intertwined. Rooted in and spun out of mystery, we all belong.

What can I speak but gratitude?
What can I sing but praise?

Margery Knott received a Bachelor of Arts magna cum laude in Anthropology from Harvard University and a Master of Arts in Teaching, specializing in English as a Second Language, from the School for International Teaching. In addition to further study in archaeology, theology, and creative writing, Margery studied in the DMin program at the University of Creation Spirituality and received a Certificate in Wisdom Spirituality from Wisdom University. She is a teacher of all ages from Adult Basic Education and kindergarten through college. Margery has led workshops in eco-theology and fiber arts, including weaving in several public schools through the Artisans Center of Virginia.

² Tobin Hart, *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2014), 251.

Tá tír na nÓg ar cúl an tí, tír alainn trína chéile

by

Elizabeth Porritt Carrington

Making Art is a practice so close in to the creative forces of the universe. In the act of making art, I feel akin to creativity itself, each work is a kind of homecoming. Art is the way for me to draw from the well. I feel alive, engaged and connected at the easel. It is a humbling experience and one I have ceased to contain or contrive. Finding my way into a contemplative art practice was the opening I had stretched out for so that I could walk with art, offering my hands to it, opening to what learning and growth came to me.

In my earlier years, through the process of art school and my beginnings as a practicing artist, I tried in great earnest to follow the directions of the contemporary art world and its movements. I discovered, again and again, that when I turned away from the creative stirrings within myself – from what truly inspired me – I was left with a feeling of empty hands and heart, and disappointed in my work.

A painting is a circling thing. There are these hands in front of me, and these tools, materials of pigment, oil, earth, and water, and then there is the relationships between them in the light and the air and the presence called in. Together in interrelationship a painting is unfolded.

All the potential in a blank canvas lays like a seed in the dark earth waiting for the rain and the sun and the rain again. I tend to paintings more and more like I would my garden, moving more towards how a forest might relate. Each element is essential to the whole and lost without each other.

I was born and raised in Ireland. The conversation with land through tradition, music and storytelling was very lively and rich in my childhood and as an artist it came alive again.

Much of my life has been spent outdoors with nature, observing closely, experiencing Earth. Through doing so, much of it is now residing within me. I often recall experiences as I work and sometimes their longing – places dreaming to be made more of and remembered rightly. As a child those same feelings scared me – the sense that the world wanted to connect with me as much as I wanted to connect with it.

It has been through art, myth, poetry and story that I have felt reassured in the growing understanding between myself and the Living Earth, listening and retrieving old connections, settling into the knowing that I am the natural world. If paintings can be altars, poems and myths are prayers and parables. They entwine themselves into my days, into my breath, into my steps.

My body's makeup in its corporeal landscape and relational systems is like that of a forest or a river or a range of mountains. Once I allow myself the right to feel my place, I can paint as if I am the river flowing through the valleys so familiar, touching its banks and feeling its river bed, carrying, carving, shaping and reshaping as it interacts with all the life within and around. The external and internal landscapes merge and scatter into each other. It is a kind of animism, but placing it in a word, seems to limit its capacity as there is more presence in it than a word can surmise. It is a sensuous aliveness that knows the powerful presence of life.

If I am very lucky, this work and my subject lend themselves to me as I to them. As we encounter each other in the crucible of making, I am able to express the beauty of that meeting. When this happens a painting becomes for me an altar of invitation. Paintings are born.

Though I have an idea of how I would like a painting to be, I release myself early on from the limitation of the concept. This takes practice: letting go, observing change, watching the painting shift and grow, standing back, giving space. It is sometimes weeks until I feel it is ready to begin again. I work on many pieces at once like this. Often, I go outside and walk in the air, move and breathe, walk up hills to feel my heart beat, put my hands into the river water to find my way again. Living in Asheville and working in The Arts District, I am near the grand French Broad River, which I visit daily. Inspired and moved by nature always, I carry a notebook and pen in my pocket for sketching and writing. My imagination is always building layers of ideas and paintings.

Holy Well

Last summer I visited a holy well in Ireland. This well was in a woodland and is little known. It is visited these days by the farmer/poet who owns the land and a few locals who believe it has curative qualities, as many holy wells in Ireland are believed to hold. This man takes great care of this well and sees it as his duty to protect this precious place of opening. I was deeply moved by my visit to this place and by his tenderness and protection of the well. He spoke of the well as *she* and *her* and recited poetry as we walked to her. I knew as I stood there in the breezy afternoon coming through the trees that I would somehow paint this place. As I stepped towards her and bowed before blessing myself, I took a moment to feel what it is was to stand before a well place that is adored and valued, with her fresh cold waters flowing into a natural bowl shape, formed beneath a cleft in limestone rocks. I dipped my fingers and asked for healing and gave thanks for being alive in this conversation with life.

In Autumn, back in Asheville, I began. I knew I wanted her to be a large piece, 5ft x 6ft. *Holy Well* is a refuge, an invitation to shelter from the storms. A place where you can come to remember. The well is subtle and natural. It is in the “mid wood silence” and a fox sleeps nearby. It is a place to drink in life. Though this looks somewhat like the well in Ireland, it took on its own life as I worked. Trees got taller as they are here in America and the season changed to fall. I imagined a holy well here in the mountains near Asheville that was loved and adored.

I have spent much of the last three years painting similar pathways into light and into dark. They are an exploration for me of the spiritual and archetypal path. I have never had such a subject that I have returned to more. Painting again and again, new pathways through the trees, each one seems to call me in deeper.

As winter turned towards Spring in the *Faoilleach* (an Irish word for the borders between the seasons), *Rose* came to fruition.

Rose

The rose has been an emblem for me and standard for twenty years now since my time living in the south of France. I worked for two years in the early 2000's with an archeological team in the village of Rennes Le Chateau. We were searching for evidence of the presence of Mary Magdalene, who is said to have lived there. The land flows full of legend of the Magdalene. I immersed myself in those stories and their historical ties. The village looked over the Valley of Colors, an unforgettable ravine on multicolored layers of clay, red and yellow ochre, terracotta, grey-lavender, blue and purple. The fields filled with the brightest wild flowers in June all drawing up from the mineral rich earth. I painted them when I could. They hummed with life upon the manifold layers of civilizations that had lived there too, seeking a way. At the edge of this ravine an ancient stony path winds its way uphill through the green hedgerows, leading to the old chateau. Wild roses grow profusely there, their perfume hanging upon the already honey sweet air.

I was just twenty-two when I arrived there, rambling around in awe of the natural beauty, the presence of history and then the troubling misinterpretations of god I was learning about in my archeological work, the efforts to tame the divine and demonize the feminine. At times it was far too much for my young head to fathom. I somewhat relinquished my effort to find reason there and left it to my heart to decipher over time.

The rose has been for centuries the powerful symbol of the divine feminine. As the years roll by, twenty or so more, and my becoming a mother myself, the image of the rose has been a support to me, an ancient symbol of the purest strength and love. I turn to the rose as one might to the cross and to remember those stories. This painting became a celebration of the rose in my life and in my work thus far, and my sense of being readily reclaimed by Earth.

Rose stands on the threshold of meadow and wood. There is a path leading behind her into the darker woods. I had originally imagined putting a ball of golden thread in her hand as Ariadne gave Theseus in the Greek myth but felt there would be no battle in these woods. The battle with the forest is over, and it is time to cross the thresholds gladly with openness and wonder. It is already done. She carries her book and pencil. Nature is with her and on her side creatively.

Rose is Mary of the Grove, a Mother, sister and daughter, is Mary Magdalene, she is a woman's work and my own relationship with the divine.

Rose continues showing me what she is, still inviting me in.



Seeing Into the Life of Things

Earth comes to meet us as much as we come to meet her. Exploring ways to be in communication with nature is an essential part of my practice, both as an artist and teacher, and I am ever learning. Earth is clearly calling us in a multitude of ways to be present. It can be overwhelming, so much so, that one might do nothing.

It is in these times I lean into ceremony and rituals like lighting candles in my studio, singing songs and praying for my loved ones and community, or making offerings to the river, or in my garden. I am reminded of my most peaceful memories of my Catholic schooling in Ireland, making May altars to Mother Mary. In elementary school, to take your turn to wash the statue of Mary was a true honor. We would bring flowers from our own gardens and light a candle each day. I was not a Catholic but loved to pray at the altar and say the Angelus and the Rosary with my friends. To have a center of devotion to kneel before made sense to my small animal body.

I have for some time wished to make paintings that could stand in the place of an altar and be like windows to a new space, there to articulate a vision of communion.

A fine carpenter in Asheville, Kevin Hughes – an Irish immigrant like myself, agreed to make me some retablo-like icons, with doors that open up to sections, so that there is an inner and outer landscape. The opening of them would not only be like an invitation to another view but would offer a sense of the ceremonial. Kevin has made me some beautiful pieces to paint.

“Seeing into the life of things,” a line from Wordsworth’s poem Tintern Abbey, is the first of these and is painted on walnut wood. The old path is brought again and this time behind a field of flowers that can be opened up to the woods.





Brigid and Her Messengers

There is no Love without Grief.

If a painting is an invitation to remember, “Brigid and Her Messengers” was that for me. The goddess and saint is remembered very keenly in Ireland. As we made a May Altar, so did we make one at Imbolc to celebrate St. Brigid in February. We brought snowdrops then. Again, candles were lit. Those early February mornings could be so dark. Lighting a single candle seemed to bring a warm glow to our entire classroom.

It was the flame that was most important, as it is believed in Ireland that Brigid holds an eternal spiritual flame for us. All my life I have thought of Brigid holding the light for us in the darkest hours and in the deepest of winter blues. Along with many other aspects of Brigid’s domain, she is

said to have brought the art of keening into the world. Keening is the old Irish tradition of singing and weeping for the dead in a very particular way. It was a dying art in Ireland, but lately there is much interest in its healing qualities.

Professional keeners are always women. They come to funerals to facilitate their community's grieving through the release of their sadness through song.

In my own grieving for loved ones, I have found myself searching for an image of Brigid keening that I could turn to for solace. This work was that effort.

Here Brigid sings messages to the black birds, the ones that can travel across the veil and bring signs of loved ones before and after a death. In their beaks they carry both the flowers and the fruit of the Hawthorn and sprigs of Yew, symbols of love, protection and regeneration. Brigid wears a crown of doorways, ways in and out of the world. This was inspired by a crown of doors upon the Virgin Mary, in the grotto at Rennes le Chateau. I was struck by the crown years ago. A midwife to the dying and carrying the light for us through winter until spring, Brigid has been the subject of a number of paintings now and I believe more to come.

In my now seven years of living in Asheville, I have had a new land to get to know. I can spy these blue ridges through an opening in the trees from my home on a hill. I go out to the mountains as often as I can and have worked slowly in my yard learning to grow food and flowers here. My time in the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program at the Center helped me immensely to open more to my senses and capacity to be in place here, and to contemplate how I could bring my work to others as a teacher.

The seasons have grown me more accustomed, and I now feel a familiarity with this place that is a step away from belonging here. Like the rose, the process of coming home to settle here holds a mystery for me that I think only my heart will make form of, for me to see. For this vast land so troubled and tethered and yet wild and free, I will walk and paint and teach, remembering this old Irish saying as I go.

Tá tír na nÓg ar cúl an tí, tír alainn trína chéile.

Taw- tier- na - knowg- air- cool- on- tea, tie all- een tree- nah- kayla

The spiritual world is out back behind your home, in the wilder places,
it is a beautiful world all woven into this one.



Elizabeth Porritt Carrington is an Irish born painter of land and mythology as well as teacher of drawing, painting and creative eco-contemplative practice. She is settled in Asheville, North Carolina where she works from her studio in the River Arts District. Her work is inspired by her relationships to landscape, their stories and people, her archaeological work in the French Pyrenees and her deep curiosity and inquiry of the experience of being human. Elizabeth plays upon the boundaries of the real and imagined, expressing the often unspoken miracles of our aliveness by fortifying their color, light, and form in a liberated palette. She practices a process of focused presence and an unapologetic love of life in all its facets. "It is on the crossing of vital points that I focus my work – the beginnings and the ending of days, seasons, years, generations, and lives too. It is at the great thresholds that I have felt most aware of being. Giving birth to my daughter and standing by loved ones who have died have given a critical and lasting sense of the tender vividness of our actuality. My work is an effort not to forget the gift of life for a moment and to fully experience being in this natural world. My paintings are windows of canvas, wood, and paper. If they can evoke or inspire a moment's rest on the majesty of the universe, they have done their job well." <https://www.elizabethcarringtonart.com/>

We Are Earth

by

Elizabeth Porritt Carrington

Working with the students of School of Living Arts (SOLA) middle and high school has been another forming path of homecoming in Appalachia for me. I have worked as aesthetics teacher with the students there for three years now, coming to the school to teach two-week periods, twice annually. SOLA is a treasure of a school, and its commitment to being in conversation with the living Earth has offered rich grounds for me to work with as a teacher.

My effort has primarily been to open doors of creativity and encourage expressions in the students that are inspired by and in recognition of the interrelatedness of their lives with the natural world, and particular to the lands that are home to their school. This has been much through the teaching of classical drawing, painting and illustrative skill and technique. And, always encircling the conversation of what art is in their lives and the support of Nature around them. Whether that is making their own charcoal to make sketches of the landscape, creating field sketchbooks, making cyanotype prints with the winter sunlight, or, as we did this past March, making a lyrical poem of their experience of SOLA life that we could illustrate with paper cut scenes.

Over the three years, I have noticed the deepening and furthering of the students' capacity to understand how valuable it is to articulate their experiences of life in a visual way. They are observing for themselves that having a visual language of their own can, in its practice, reveal aspects of themselves and their lives that they may not see otherwise. This is particularly apparent in their artistic expressions of their sense of connection with the land they inhabit at school and seeing their part in the ecosystem there.

This poem was co-created over a week together. We began visioning for it by making a black board of life, listing all the visible life we see and know at SOLA. The students then went outside with their sketchbooks and pencils. I asked them to try for a while to not name what they see but notice the qualities of the life. They each had three subjects to work with. The second day we did the same with the life that was invisible to the eye. They then wrote out notes of all the life seen and unseen, described in its qualities of being.

We had a basket in the middle of our large table, seating fifteen of us, where they placed their notes. We visioned more together, taking out notes and reading them to each other and starting conversations around their ideas. These conversations generated more ideas and notes and the basket began to fill. By the end of the week we had a far range of material. Our conversations of life at SOLA and the land there were getting very interesting indeed. Mid conversation, four days in, a student emphatically cried out, WE ARE EARTH!

Yes we are! and we had a title, I replied.

That weekend, I laid all their words out on my kitchen table. It was quite a bounty. I created some ceremony of the reading and got started on pulling it all together. Some were already perfectly formed lines of poetry, others were expressions and thoughts full of vitality and heart, listing the traits and virtues of their lives at SOLA. They had encountered beauty in multitudinous forms on those days and were gushing about Earth and their school. It was, as a teacher, a most exciting and invigorating process to meld together these works of young minds and hearts pouring over. I felt very blessed by it.

After this poem was formed, I asked the students to then take sections to illustrate, they made paper cut scenes of their sections which will be used in the creating of a shadow play in our next block together.

We Are Earth

It is snowing here in the mountains of Southern Appalachia
Winter still, though spring is close at hand
We can smell it in the earth and on the air.
Tiny white star flakes are covering the first purple violets
Their flurries will blanket the red clay roads soon.
This last breathe of winter has come to land.

Our School is a village of round houses, warm nests of our learning
Settled in along the shoulders of Mount Pisgah,
We are high in the ridges blue.
We come here by all our paths, a spectrum arriving like rainbows
Each day, each season, each year that passes.

The trees greet us first along our way
They are tall, grey brown umber in this light
White Oak, Maple, Poplar, Birch, Cedar, Hickory...
Rooting, branching out like neurons or bronchi.
The dogwoods will show their blooms in the lower canopy
Spring's early risers will be dreaming white butterflies on the breeze.

Cardinals red, flaunt their feathers before spring comes again
Piliated woodpeckers make hollow taps sounding out the quiet woods like drums
The air is pure and clean
Deep green pines sway in harmony, resin perfume raises up to the sky.
And all along the edges of crystal streams symphonic waterfalls accumulate different keys
Splunking here and bubbling there,
Then softly flowing over smoothed out granite or quartz, like small glaciers.

Mica sparkles like fish scales in the sun by silver stripes, minnows
Traveling together, around the pools like friends at recess.
Hérons visit here, coming through in wide heavy wingbeats
Long beak poised, they stand like statues at the water's edge
Fishers of the tributaries, of all these capillaries, of life.

Mossy stones are small world rainforests.
Ferns, lacey and smooth, uncoil their spines from spirals and roll out their leaves for Spring and
Spiders weaving webs catching dewy drops of morning
Others between the rocks, running hither and thither
Salamanders mottled red and brown. Worms, working their way down, in the Underworld
to the burrows and dens and mycelium messages.

The fruit trees bloom and a new snow falls
Pink petals and the palest creams of peach, cherry and apple blossoms too
Their sweet fruit will fall generously, lovingly to us.
The garden grows again, vegetables like easter eggs to be sought out

They taste sweeter when grown by you.

We work with the gardens and the bees hum
The birds sing and children's voices raise up like hands
To say we are not alone, we are here echoing with the birdsong
Playing up trees in colored raincoats, sliding down muddy hills in the rain,
The fledgling children trying out their wings, inhabit this place
Being part of everything.

Come, climb up with us, off the trails to caves and enter into the dark
Encouraging each other to be who we are.
Some say no, it is wild out there, in the woods,
Stick to the trail, it's straight, a right track, and never look back.

But up there on the bald, the cattle roam, long horned white and sandal brown
Gentle beasts, their eyes tell you that. Their great mass tells another story, old.
Their breath heavy and deep as if out of the very soil.
And there are galaxies of flowers that bloom on those slopes, some seen and unseen
Galleries of color, spreading wide their hues, glowing out messengers of beginning and ending
And beginning again making seed pods to rattle in fall's winds.

When Girls are knighted, dubbed for integrity and chivalry and care for their world
Whilst snakes slither through, sunning themselves on rocks or hanging from trees like ropes,
You won't see them till you do.
Virago and Lyra, Pyrenean friends protect the rabbits here and sheep and Loki the pony.
They look too huggable to be fierce but bark enough as you pass to spread their word
Till they circle their napping spot, again resting with one eye open.

Our teachers, our guides, walk alongside us. They show us how to make our own books.
A gentle giant smiles upon us being sure all our interests are at heart.
And here there is a gate keeper, and mystery weaver seeing over us and all we do

And that none is turned away from a School of Living Arts. An ancient new school, an old wisdom,
Bright vision of how it could be,
Like the small mossy stone in the stream or an island in the sea.
A haven, in the storm of undoing and unease.

For it's not news that people forgot the way.
That belonging to the earth was lost in the plundering, in the taking and the tearing
Humans in their problem solving were problem creating and became afraid of the unknown
We forgot to be the colored galaxies of flowers seen and unseen willing to open and grow old.

As fall becomes winter it is traditional here, to walk a spiral of candlelight and fir,
Slowly the woods become a glowing constellation of light,
And we take turns to walk the night sky.
Silently or in whispers and then into songs
we carry the year into another year through
Re-membling Earth as we learn and grow and
Our part in the system that serves all life.

The gifts in our own hands that can bring light and more light and more life
We open our books and write, into our days and our nights

We are Earth

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Elizabeth Carrington, Holy Well



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