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, on a table in my living room for a few years. I thought maybe, one day, the opportunity would come for me to set some of these poems to music. “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 Spectral Spirits was as much a study of humans as it was of birds. I found myself asking how human beings are 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 our 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. 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 earthly blue than sky...a fit color for this airiel traveller as its path is between sky and earth.” — Henry David Thoreau (1857–1862), American author and naturalist, adapted by the composer from Hope is the Thing with Feathers by Christopher Cokinos (b. 1965)

The Naming
Echtopistes migratorius. Wandering wanderer.

Passenger Pigeon from the painting by James J. Audubon. 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殊玩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 each detail of the scene. 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.

Now, of those hundreds of millions that once darkened
the skies, we are left with Martha,
who never lived in the wild,
but in the Smithsonian,
when glass eyes staring, waiting, still, for
her mate. — Holly J. Hughes

Carolina Parakeet
Incis, the last Carolina parakeet, died
in his cage at the Cincinnati Zoo on
in his 32nd year.

No one knows for sure you’re
gone. You live on
in the pages of a book, a waning
crescent moon.
— Holly J. Hughes

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

Even then you were almost gone,
two million curlews were killed
each year.

Hope

The Naming (alto solo)
Puzzo la neé. Head of yellow.
Conuropsis carolinensis.

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

“In winter...flocks of paroquets
were a real ornament to the trees
...and on Christmas Eve, was
decorated with gilded and silvered
nests, apples and candies, not
unlike these bird-covered tree tops,
these enormous Christmas trees of the forest.” — Gert Goebel (1816-1896),
Germansettler in eastern Missouri,
from a translation of his 1877 autobiography,
adapted by the composer from
Hope is the Thing with Feathers
by Christopher Colinus

The Naming (also solo)

“Call of a distant flock.
Your crescent-moon beak
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)
average 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 (also solo)
Nunzium boralis. Sweeggrass.

Swiftwing. Little Sicklebill.

Eskimo Curlew

“A most graceful undulation...like
a cloud of smoke wafted by the
lightest zephyr.
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The Naming (also solo)

Nunzium boralis. Sweeggrass.

Swiftwing. Little Sicklebill.

Eskimo Curlew

“I wish I’d been at the sighting that
inspired this nickname,
the Lord God bird. I’d love to see
this woodpecker,
perhaps extinct, perhaps not; no
ones 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 1935, when a Louisiana forest
was cleared for a soy plantation,
the last population vanished. The
 Cuban subspecies survived
a few more decades, but by 1975, logging had reduced its
population
to eight pairs. In the 1990s,
explorers in the mountains near
Moja
found fresh signs of feeding,
caught a glimpse of a bird that
may
have been the ivory bill, but that
sighting was never confirmed.

Ivy-Billed Woodpecker

““The first place I observed this
bird...was twelve miles north of
Wilmingon...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 Colinus

The Naming (also solo)

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

Ivy-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,
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

Before I spoke that night
I knew my father
would curse

If I had not asked you to speak
a lie

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

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

Would you have ruled
better than I

Would you have ruled
my quiet
spoke king

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

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

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

For a moment
I let you die

For a moment
my quiet
spoke king

For a moment
my silence
became my reign

Are you dead
because of my life
Donald Nally conducts The Crossing, the internationally acclaimed, GRAMMY-award-winning professional choir that commissions, premiers, 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 Musical America 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, Ireland, 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
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