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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 39-40: The Mystic & the Muse

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



November–December 2021

Issue 39–40: *The Mystic & the Muse*

In Memoriam Mark Roglán & Billy Abraham

October had been the cruelest month. It rained a cold rain in the early days of November as I recalled all that had transpired in the preceding weeks. Halloween activities had long been incidental to me, thinking not much of the ghoulish makeup that all the youngsters on the streets were wearing. Though, this year I was struck by the number of costumed adults who suddenly appeared in an H.E.B. in downtown Corsicana, where I'd stopped briefly that holiday afternoon. Earlier that day, I attended a church service near my home in Dallas and had lunch with old friends, before tending to some errands and then taking off for a Sunday afternoon drive, enjoying the beautiful country views on I45-S. The blue sky, the fresh air, the wispy cloud formations, and the blur of roadside businesses along the highway all yielded to empty fields, family farms, cattle ranches, and wooded areas near Navarro County. It was an afternoon passage to the countryside to clear the mind of urban clutter.



Halloween—*All Hallows' Eve*—has become a comical retreat of masked and garbed youth, now popular even among adults at work, church parties, and senior centers, replete with sugary additions. The days that follow, All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2), in contrast, are generally more studied and somber, and this year for me they were more present, real, and urgent, in good part because more colleagues and friends had been discussing these holidays on social media. But

even more, because by the end of October five people I had known had died, including friends, family members, and colleagues. The first days of November this year had particular poignancy, because the *all saints* and *all souls* days came and went among various memorial and funeral services. These holidays were visible, tangible expressions of communities reflecting on their respect for the deceased, tinged with grief, sorrow, regret, and pause.

During the first week of October, the SMU Community received news that Mark Roglán had died. Mark was a colleague and friend, whom I'd first met when I came to Dallas in 2018. He was also the esteemed Director of the Meadows Museum just across the boulevard from Bridwell, and he happily and regularly shared his bountiful spirit with us. I still remember the times I would visit or bring a guest over to the museum and introduce them to Mark, and he would graciously offer a private tour of the collections. I remember one particular time when he told me of a recent acquisition and went into the detailed political history of the ornate framing of the painting. He possessed a boundless enthusiasm and love for art, a focused perseverance, vibrant tenacity, unceasing work ethic, steady commitment and unwavering support for those who worked with him, and a desire to embrace and include others in his orbit of intellectual curiosity.

In this respect, I now wish I had engaged with him more. I didn't know he was such a devout man, but it came through in his devotions to art that reflected divine and religious experiences. It now seems common—and obvious—to me, that we often learn much more about people, even our family and friends, after they are gone. I was stunned when I heard of Mark's passing—he was, after all, just a few years older than me. And I'd been in touch with him a month or so earlier but knew nothing of the severity of his health. I had invited him to the Dante Festival at the end of August and he responded with a short note. "Great to hear from you. The Dante festival and dinner look like fun and the programing is terrific. Congratulations!" He finished with a note declining the invitation due to health. A quick follow up, and he responded and signed off "*ark*"—without an "M." I only realized this going back to the emails later. Like his last email to me with his unintentionally incomplete name vanishing on my screen, soon too would Mark himself leave us, a wondrous life incomplete, a man physically gone.

After the news was announced, I visited his staff and colleagues at Meadows, and spent part of that afternoon roaming around the museum. I was drawn into the grand halls and galleries, testaments to his perseverance and abiding legacy. But something unusual happened, something that might almost seem cliché.

As I walked around it was unusually quiet. There weren't many people inside the museum that day. There was a little distant chatter from the entry hall, that's all. But I was mostly buffered from anything audible and found myself alone in the main gallery surrounded by more than a dozen great paintings on the walls. A silver cross stood off to my right as I sat there silently. I looked up at each painting with renewed interest and scrutinizing eyes. I soon began to take notice for the first time of the human

expressions of the subjects in each painting. The pains, the contortions, the excruciating twists and turns of their bodies, the grimacing looks and twisted mouths of men, women, and children in their most human pain. I saw images of sacred hearts and Christlike motions overlaid onto very human conditions. I never noticed these expressions before. I'd often only scampered through these halls, admiring, but perhaps not understanding. Art is something complex and misunderstood—but that's what makes it so human. For aren't we also *usually* complex and misunderstood? This was the first time I'd felt the humanity in art, as much as I *thought* I knew this all my life. It was different this time.



Of course, I was experiencing art in a state of shock and disbelief, in an hour of mourning the sudden forever loss of a friend and colleague. It never occurred to me how much we bring into situations of experience our own biases and feelings. Our moments of encounter are tinged with the inner presence and place we believe we are occupying. It reminded me of the theory that if you eat in the dark, the taste of the food is more nuanced, heightened, and accentuated; it becomes *more* flavorful. The thought is that as your other senses are muted, the one that you are at that moment focused on becomes dominant. Your most important sense would be taste. I didn't believe it until it actually happened to me at a dinner my mother had made—halfway through the meal, she turned the lights down to almost nothing, and lit a candle. The taste of the food went from "tasty" to "phenomenally delicious"—an extraordinary contrast—in just a single moment after the lights were out. It was so startling that I told my mother. Now, this may have been a figment of my imagination, but I still believe it to have been a very real experience. Just as I truly believe that on that day in October, I began to see, to witness, and to experience art differently than I had before that

instant. It was a moment of both mystery and clarity.

I remained in that gallery meditating over the paintings and thinking raucously in the quietness of the museum. A retiree from Britain emerged critiquing a painting unaware of the museum's current loss—"there's something wrong with that painting, I don't like the painter's technique!" she appraised loudly. Mark would have loved this engagement. The confluent nature of my experience jarred by a completely detached visitor was just the kind of phenomenon that makes cultural institutions great, profound, and transformative. When I left, I emerged at the front of the museum to hear the peeling of bells followed by bagpipes at HPUMC—an accidental tribute from afar. That evening I went to the racquetball court and spent an hour and a half by myself pounding that ball into the wall as if I were pummeling the gates of Heaven with a burning anger against a cruel creator. Just as much as I needed to be in those galleries that day, submerged beneath a crowded silence of ancient paintings, learning how to *feel* a painting, so too did I need the visceral exercise of slamming a ball into a nameless wall to expel the rage against this fickle fate that came to our community that day. Body and soul wed in the nourishment of art and sport. As my friend and colleague, the renowned poet and martial artist, Hal Recinos has said "art is poetry for the eyes." Perhaps sport is poetry for the muscles. Both experiences of the day stretched me across the physical, emotional, and spiritual spectra.

Mark was a muse, an inspiration to many. He still is. And he may also have been a mystic; a person whose visionary prowess transcended the quotidian details and issues to instill a sense of human mystery, awe, and ultimately a genuine divine love for his fellow sisters and brothers in life.

This was the sense of camaraderie, fellowship, and brotherhood many of us also saw with our friend and colleague Billy Abraham. I learned of Billy's passing just a day after I'd heard about Mark. Our community was plunged into a collective shock and mourning again. The feelings of unresolved debates, conversations, and spiritual conundrums swirled among his acolytes, devotees, family, and soul-siblings. A deep and expansive ripple of unfinished business swelled around the globe that

week, as old friends and colleagues of Billy began to reconnect with one another.

I last saw Billy in his car stopped at a cross-walk near the Torchy's Tacos off Greenville in early October. That image is burned in my mind—singled like an ir retrievable moment that had no meaning at the time, but now marks my last fleeting encounter and witness of his human soul on earth, his divine spirit before us—before it was too soon gone. It's profoundly mysterious. And makes me (at least) pause and reflect on the nature of ourselves, our humanness, and our connection to the world here and beyond.

Billy had many friends and followers. His lectures and talks to people not just here in Dallas, but around the globe, were greatly in demand and attended by a sizeable diversity of individuals and groups. Billy and I often hashed out some interesting topic or point that usually dealt with evangelism and the holy spirit, or a mediated discourse on the merits of working with both Evangelical and Orthodox faithful in Central Asia. He'd told me of his travels to Kazakhstan and had been considering following a connection in Tajikistan when things "cooled down" and he could travel more regularly. Billy was laser focused and demanded a good argument, and an equally powerful commitment to what you believed. Nothing wishy-washy. In some meetings or lectures he would go for the jugular but provided resuscitation if the interlocutor could hold their theological ground—if in fact there *was* any ground left to stand on after Billy had made his own case!

One of my favorite Billy stories was one which at the time I thought "who is this guy!?"—because I was a new member of the Perkins community, and had never been in a faculty meeting where we had debated the merits of analytics, metrics, and numerical evaluation, only to have the conversation turn to a theologian who questioned the very premise of it all with a disarming welcome and pause, offering: "after all of these numbers and digits and frameworks are tossed around and dragged out and debated, where in these metrics actually is the *Holy Spirit*?" It was beautiful, and pure Billy.

The interfaith, ecumenical vision was mystical, especially as he explored the meanings of life

between the interstices of Evangelical and Orthodox communities, in a way he believed they existed and manifested in this world, and *not* in the way that they were portrayed in the public square or media. Unfortunately, for many of us, these conversations were too few. We had many more things to learn from him, to talk to him about, to hash out and reveal with him. While I was assisting with the preparations for his memorial in late October, I looked over most of his published books. I recalled when I came for my campus interview in early 2018 and was told that Dr. Abraham was on the search committee, and diligently consulted his writings and even prepared an answer to a question he might pop on *prevenient grace* between courses at the committee dinner—he ended up being on leave, so I didn’t meet him before I was hired. But what I had missed, and only discovered while preparing for his service, was a book called *Among the Ashes: On Death, Grief, and Hope*—a book Billy wrote about the loss of his son Timothy in June 2013. I asked myself: *How had I not read this before?*—or even, *how had I not even known about it!*? It made me realize that I—and many of us—don’t appreciate what, *and more importantly, who* is around us, especially as we live crazy, busy, hectic, and often incessantly distracted lives; lives that regret the missed opportunities of sharing another meal with friends or not probing an issue deeply enough, because we didn’t find time.

For a moment, Billy’s *Among the Ashes* reminded me of *From Time to Time*, the memoirs of Hannah Tillich, the wife of the late theological giant Paul Tillich, in which she spoke of the desolation of the soul when looking out onto an open sea. An insider’s view on Tillich’s life and work from the vision of a vacant ocean somehow revealed an even more powerful commentary on Tillich than Tillich could of himself and his own elemental and granular theology. The reality of life, the flesh and blood circumstances of pain and loss that came through, then, in Billy’s book on death and grief bore out a profound sense of emptiness that followed. How he managed to grapple with both meaning and purpose toward each other and God was crafted finally in Billy’s own struggle to find God’s grace. Like the afternoon I spent in the Meadows galleries reimagining what art meant in the face of loss, it wasn’t until I began reading Billy’s book that I had a profoundly deep and utterly real sense of his thought, beliefs, and most

visceral spiritual struggle. I don’t think we can actually step into and ever fully understand another person’s pain, but it can be conveyed to a point and we embrace them for their courage and honesty and begin to feel something along that path with them. But here, Billy was now gone, and I was reading words he wrote about death and struggle, which themselves were so full of life and vibrancy, precisely because they were about loss and death. He was more alive and real to me in that moment than ever before. And here he was, teaching me after he was gone, because his words on the printed page had a more eternal presence than the fleeting jollity of our banter over shared meals—as much as I cherished those moments. Before, Billy taught me to laugh and live into my commitments and what I believe; now he was teaching me simply to live. Like the great role of the holy mystics, their visions were never fully realized, and only after they were gone did their friends and followers come to reveal the deeper truths of their commitments and lives to the world.

At his memorial service, the beauty of the trumpet played by his son Shaun filled the sacred sanctuary with dulcet sound, and his humor transcended his presence on earth with stories told by those who survived him. The camaraderie and fellowship of those who attended and gathered after to share stories was heartwarming and brought together the myriad of friends who knew and loved Billy. I was reminded of something else just a few days later, thinking of how a person’s memory and “aliveness” continues in some cultures, where the belief is that a person lives on until the last person who knew the deceased themselves dies. I learned this, admittedly, in the Disney film *Coco*, which happened to be playing at a public showing at the Plaza Theater in the Dallas north suburbs during the *Day of the Dead* (*el Día de los Muertos*), celebrated between November 1-2—ostensibly, a version of *All Saints* and *All Souls* days. But the connection here came back to me on *el Día de los Muertos*, just two days after Billy’s memorial, as I descended into a carnival of endearing and joyous celebration the evening of November 1st in Garland. It was a festival, a true celebration of *life and death*—of the memories of those who had died in recent years. The culture of Mexico, and Latin America more broadly, has a beautiful sense of realism and embodiment of death—something that seems to be sorely lacking in the United States and many

European cultures. To walk through more than a thousand people singing, dancing, dressing up in elaborate costumes with skeleton-painted faces of black and white, honoring their relatives with food offerings and magnificent *ofrendas* (offerings) altars to their families is something both remarkable and honorable. The feeling that death is *part of* life, not something necessarily against it, or even something we forget, made me feel more alive in that moment than the passive, dull, and muted treatment we give to many in our society, to our friends and families, for whom we have seemingly cursory funerals, and then forget about just a few months later. Indeed, even one of Mark Roglán’s daughters said at his memorial service: “don’t forget him or us after a few months.” *El Día de los Muertos* is probably what Halloween *should be* but isn’t. But *el Día de los Muertos* is ever-more important to me now—and in this month of loss, it became a touchpoint for realizing our humanness, and our interconnectivity as human beings on a pulsing planet that continues with the living and the lost spirits mingling above and around us. And like Mark and Billy, their words, their art, their legacies live on more than ever now in my soul.

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On my way down to Houston in mid-November for a work trip, I stopped off in Huntsville, TX and happened upon the Texas State Prison Museum. I decided to go in and paid my \$7 entrance fee. When the proprietor greeted me, he guided me toward an introductory film and made a point of saying: “don’t miss Ol’ Sparky—the oldest electric chair in Texas!” I was moderately horrified. The events of the month, the loss of life, of friends and family, was still on my mind, and here I was entering a space by dint of fate that was celebrating the mechanical rudiments of the death industry. It couldn’t have been more dissonant a contrast. There were even shirts of all sorts extolling incarceration and morbidity through humor, the glory of outlaws, and vintage wanted posters. The displays were replete with makeshift weapons, tools, shanks, and contraband, as well as instruments of execution adjacent to Ol’ Sparky—hanging rope, firing squad elaborations, guns, and intravenous poison syringes and catheters...all there laying on display for people to see. I felt a knot in my stomach. An artist had done a photo essay of families affected by death row and execution: photos of mothers of those executed

and some of families of those affected by the murderers. It was a very human, yet very commercialized, commodified American experience. The profiting off death was something quite common and troubling. I felt the tension of a conflicted set of stories that were speaking about “good treatment” and the “introduction of rodeos in the 1930s prison system to increase morale” to the horrific tools of mass incarceration and death.

A different scene played out down in Houston that evening—at the MFA. There, I encountered contemporary projections of human suffering as measured and expressed through art. I saw an astonishing work of pixelated photos rendered in coffee-stained sugar cubes made to recreate victims of a criminal world buoyed by systems of power. The piece, the exhibit, and the museum itself was an inverse of the prison exhibits—they both showed death, but they came from different places: one was about a system, the other was about human suffering. Yet only in the space of art did I feel discomfort and healing in the same moment.

Like the galleries of Meadows or the pages of *Among the Ashes*, the moments of human space must demand our attention, but also grab us in meaningful ways that entice us to not simply say “this makes me feel good,” but to shout back, feel the struggle, the anguish, the pain, and ultimately grow and heal as individuals and communities. This is what it is to be human. I miss Mark and Billy. I turn over in my mind the lost opportunities, the questions I would or should have asked, if only I had known this or that. It’s easy to be mired in regret, but we must take what we can and remember that our memories of our friends and family are in their own way an offering (*ofrenda*) to the future and to those who may not have known the joys, wonders, and beauty of these kind spirits. Let not their memories or their families be forgotten.

Requiescant in pace ~ AJE

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