Daughters, hear the music

Erin Gong

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reek his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerald Manley Hopkins

Some mothers sing lullabies to their children at bedtime. Some read stories about puppies and bunnies and sunshine. My two girls were raised on Hopkins. Every night I pulled out the hardback anthology that my husband, Greg, gave me on our one-year anniversary and read a poem or two aloud to them.

“You’re a flower child, Jean,” he said when he gave it to me. “I’ll never understand your thing for poetry.”

Neither did I. One of my boyfriends in college read a poem by Hopkins to me when he was drunk and stoned. It was the sixties then and people were
full of themselves trying to break down the system, the world. I laughed at Hopkins’s words about God and faith because they were honest. And then I cried at Hopkins’s rhythm and sounds because they were real. Coming through Bruce’s drawling, slurred speech, the poetry brought me to a place with the believers. I broke up with Bruce, but I kept reading—Hopkins, Yeats, Tennyson—voices that created something solid. Eating poetry kept me alive.

“I wrote an essay about it once,” I told Greg.

“About poetry? I thought you were in biology.”

“About Hopkins’s poetry,” I explained. “It was for . . . fun.”

It wasn’t for fun. I wrote it because I finally realized that I needed to understand how his poetry could be my life-line. I was scared to write it because I had never done anything like that before; I was even more scared to finish it because that meant I would understand what Hopkins understood. And if I didn’t understand or if I didn’t like it . . . then what would keep me alive? All of this I could have explained to Greg, but he had already turned on the TV, remote in one hand, beer in the other.

When I read to my two girls, Clara was the one who listened. And so I wasn’t surprised when she decided to study literature in college. She understood the power of language in a way that I knew Mattie, her sister, would never care to learn. Clara always had some paper she wanted me to look over and give her feedback on. Not that I helped much. But I loved it; she wrote in a way that I never dared, and so I lived through her writing.

One weekend early in November, Clara made another one of her surprise visits home. I never told her how much those visits meant to me. The house was quiet with only Mattie left. And even then it seemed like Mattie had already moved out, too—at school until seven every night, shutting herself in her bedroom with dinner and a stack of homework, and spending the whole weekend with friends.

One day I realized that almost a whole week passed by and I hadn’t seen anything except the back of her head disappearing out the door. I approached her late one night in the kitchen. When I came in, she was drinking a glass of milk. Her hair was done up with a ribbon, her sports bag still hanging across her shoulder.

“Mattie—” I began.

The tone of my voice gave my annoyance away. Mattie put her glass down and swept a stray piece of hair out of her face. “What?”

“I just . . .” my voice faded too quickly.

“You just want to make sure I’m okay.” She paused. “And I am.”

“I know . . .”

“I’m even well nourished. Calcium, right?” She held up the glass of milk. I didn’t push it. “Well, just don’t stay up too late.” I regretted the words as they came from my mouth. One more criticism. One more piece of advice. One step further from her.
Anyway, when Clara came home that weekend I remember her talking about school, as usual. I was standing in the kitchen cooking chicken for dinner, and Clara was sitting at the counter doodling on napkins. “It’s not that I don’t like the classes . . . I just wonder if there’s any real worth to pouring over words and words and more words,” she was saying.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Words have built this whole structure for us to try to talk about what we can’t always have with us. They don’t have any real meaning—they just stand in for what isn’t there.”

She grabbed a fresh napkin and started drawing the frame of a house. I was stirring chicken pieces on the frying pan to keep them from scorching.

“So do you want to do something else?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“You could follow your mom’s path and do biology . . .”

She was scrawling arrows around the house pointing to different areas of the framework. Laughing a little at my comment, she made the arrows move away from the house in all different directions. “Yeah right, Mom. I could never handle that.”

Follow your instincts, do what you want.
No, I can’t tell her what to do.

I turned back to the stove and Clara continued, “I feel like there’s something else though that I could be doing. The words just don’t mean anything anymore.”

She didn’t say anything for a while. When I turned back to the counter she had left the room. I looked down at the napkin; the arrows had turned to lazy lines spiraling loosely across the napkin. I knew she’d stick to English. She was just like me—hard-working and idealistic, but too hesitant, waiting until time is gone. And what did she mean, the words don’t mean anything? Words are words . . . sometimes they mean everything. I smelled something burning and I turn back to the stove just in time to save the blackened chicken.

“Dinner’s ready,” I called.

She died the next weekend.

The rain was furiously beating on the windowpane when the phone rang. “Your daughter Clara has been in a car accident.”

My heartbeat echoed in my head, thumping in time with the rain. “Is she okay?” The quiver in my voice made my eyes swell with tears. She’s okay, she’s okay. I waited and the room darkened around me. “I’m sorry,” the voice said. Or maybe just “No.” I don’t remember the words. I remember that it was calm and that bothered me. How could the voice that told me my daughter was dead be calm? It should have trembled with me, it should have been broken by tears, it should have been hollow with grief. But instead it was infuriatingly calm.
The voice gave me more information about when and where the accident occurred. It told me what my husband and I were supposed to do now. I wrote it all down, but I don't know how because the pulsing of the blood in my head drowned out the words. It drowned my vision too, so that the paper and pencil in front of me were both bright white and the rest of the room was dark stars fading in and out.

When I hung up the phone, I sat down and let the rain breathe for me because my lungs could only get quick gasps of air between long pauses. No tears came either: the rain was enough.

The next few weeks—months ... it was always the same. One day I'd wake up and know that wherever she was Clara was happy and that life would be all right without her. That'd keep me going as I showered and dressed and watched the morning news. Then when the house was quiet and I was sorting through the papers on the kitchen counter I would think of Clara again, think that it'd only been three miserable weeks without her. And I would cry because three weeks is a long time, and even longer when I know that three weeks will never end, but turn into four then five then six weeks and on and on until finally I died and then maybe that'd be the end, but who's to say.

An hour later I would be okay again.

At least once a day I met somebody who knew about the accident. It was at the grocery store or the bank or the gym; it didn't matter. They would walk over to me, gently take my arm, and looking up into my eyes say with the greatest concern, "How are you doing today, Jean?"

"Oh, you know ... I'm hanging in there."

After the seventeenth time I had mastered the reply. With sympathetic smiles they said, "If you need anything, don't hesitate to call, okay?"

"Thank you. Yes, I'll remember that."

It's what they wanted to hear, I think. It made them feel good; it made them feel Christian. I couldn't get too mad at them: they didn't know how ludicrous that first question was. How are you feeling today? Today? Well, this morning I felt awful and now things are looking better, but by tonight I'll probably feel like killing myself again. That's how I feel today. How about yesterday? Oh, yesterday all day was good. Of course, I spent it in front of the TV watching anything on daytime television that would keep my mind off of the fact that there are real problems in the world and that I have to deal with one of them but I can't seem to do it and that scares me half to death.

Oh, you know ... I'm hanging in there.

Mattie had a hard time, too. Her routine didn't change much, and so I didn't see her often. But sometimes behind that closed bedroom door, I could hear her sobbing.
I almost knocked once. But instead of coming down on the door with a
distinct tap, my hand opened up and ran noiseless across the soft white finish.
When my hand grasped the corner of the door frame, I buried my head in it,
putting all my weight into that corner and thinking, *Open the door, Jean, open
it.* Ten minutes must have passed before I moved again. But I didn’t try to
knock; I backed away into my own bedroom and closed the door behind
me. It didn’t bother me that Mattie always shut herself up that way. What
bothered me was that somewhere in her seventeen years I had lost the ability
to open the door.

I told my husband that I wanted to go to church. *Want* was probably the
wrong word—I should have said *need.* Either way, we went to church and sat
in uncomfortable and unfamiliar pews. I tried to listen to the minister’s sermon,
but I had a hard time concentrating on the speech about heaven and hell.
Instead I looked at how the light coming through the window made the
stained-glass Jesus look as if he were scowling at the little baby in front of us.
And the red from his crowned head danced across the buttons on the baby’s
furry jacket. I tried to find some symbolic meaning from this, but then the
choir began to sing.

*Glory to the Lord. Hosanna to His name.*

Or something like that. I was listening, but it was hard to understand the
words. There was energy, though, and I liked that. After the choir, the minister
got up again. I turned back to Jesus and the baby, but a cloud had covered the
sun, and so Jesus looked sacredly solemn and the baby was only a baby.

I didn’t go to church the next week, or any time after that. The choir was
good, but it wasn’t worth all that preaching to get to. I used Hopkins as my
Bible instead. As I studied the Good Book, I laughed at the irony because all
I read were the Terrible Sonnets. Hopkins wrote those at the end of his life,
when he had apparently lost his hope in God. I read “No Worst, There is
None,” and I understood.

*Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing.*

The funny thing was, whenever I opened the book, I always opened first
to “The Grandeur of God.” I refused to read it, but I needed to make sure it
was still there. I couldn’t believe that the same man who wrote of such hope
and praise really turned so far from it in the end. I saw the title but wouldn’t
read it, because now that I had turned away with Hopkins, I didn’t want to
go back either. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in God anymore. I did believe. I
had to believe. That’s where Clara was, and if I stopped believing in God,
then Clara would really be gone forever.
I believed.

It scared me, though, to look at those words on the page about God’s grandeur. I did it once, right after Clara’s accident.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed

Crushed . . . like the car, crushed. Oozing oil and blood . . .
No.

God is the center of everything in the poem. Flame exists because of Christ’s light, and crushed oil is an image of atonement. It’s beautiful.

But what did Clara say about words? Merely words on the page that had no meaning. Hopkins couldn’t hold God in his hands or paste Him onto the page, so he found a word to stand in for Him . . . G-O-D, God. It doesn’t have any real meaning, it’s never had real meaning—it’s a reminder of what is absent. You can’t hold God in your hands. I used to hold Clara in my hands. Clara—it’s just a word now, isn’t it? Every time I say her name it’s just a word standing in for what can no longer be present. Clara! God! Where are they?

The center, God. He is Light, shook foil, crushed oil . . . but these are more words, more absences. And what if it isn’t even God at all—what if it’s death, grief, everything in our dreams that leaves us in a cold, wild sweat that we can never forget but can never disclose either.

“The center cannot hold,” Yeats said. The center . . . God . . . cannot hold. I cannot hold my Clara.

I didn’t like to read “God’s Grandeur” after that. Maybe Hopkins didn’t like to read them either. Maybe that’s why he started writing the “Terrible Sonnets.”

Sometime after Christmas had passed, Mattie surprised me by coming home from school early one afternoon. I caught her in the hallway as she headed towards her room. When she saw me she ducked her head down and tried to shift between me and her door. “What are you doing home so early?” I asked.

“No reason . . . just felt like it, I guess.”

“Is something wrong?” I cocked my head to see her face. “You look pale.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom.” The silence hung between us and it created more empty space than the hallway allowed. “Can I get by you?”

“Mattie, I feel like we haven’t talked for such a long time,” I started, not knowing what to say, but hoping to keep her just a moment more.
My words brought her head up to look into my eyes, “Oh, so you noticed? It’s been longer than a few months, Mom.” She didn’t wait for my reply. She brushed around me, the door closed, I was alone.

That evening I crawled up into the attic to rifle through my box of old college work. The musty air reminded me somewhat of the biology labs . . . although I’m not sure why. I pulled out the mortar board and graduation cords from the top of the box and began to look through the stack of brittle yellow papers. Most of them had a dark red A or B+ scrawled across the top. Towards the bottom of the stack, I found one paper without a grade or markings on it.

I was filled with unexpected emotion as I pulled it out. Seven clean hand-written pages, carefully stapled at the top. I turned through them one by one and the grease from my fingers left a slight smudge on each thin page. My essay on Hopkins—the last page, of course, stopped in the middle of a paragraph. I saw the incomplete thoughts from my twenty-some-year-old self suspended, never changing, but ever-waiting to be resolved.

I thought I should finish it. But finishing the paper meant looking one more time at that poem, one more time facing the nothingness of the words, the revulsion of the words. But it had been waiting so long for me to come back. Except for the paper, I put everything back into the box and closed it up. At least this was something that I could reason out, that I could control, that I could wrap up, right? And today had been okay, so far.

Sitting in the office, I finished reading the last line of the paper. “The true grandeur of Hopkins’s poem comes when we look past the actual words that he uses and listen to the sonorous symphony they create; his message moves beyond the images and beyond the metaphors into the rhythms of life.”

Did he know that? I wondered to myself. Do I know that?

I folded the other six pages on top of the last and then I read the paper again. Reading and rereading, thinking and rethinking, I tried to understand. Then I picked up the blue hardback anthology that Greg had given me. With the book in hand, I opened to page twelve.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” I read.

I remember stopping at the last four lines and saying them again, slowly and out loud.

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
And then I felt it. God—He was in the poem. He was in the rhythm, in the music. The syllables rolled around in my mouth and then escaped into the air. And for that split second between the beginning and end of sound, there was a presence. It pulsed quickly through the room with revitalizing fervor. The energy in the room grabbed me. It wasn't words, it was rhythm and music.

I returned to the last page of the paper. The ink from my pen tapered off slightly as I signed my name at the bottom of the page. Now I wanted to put the paper away somewhere. It was done, and I didn't need to look at it anymore. I felt alive—I had never felt so alive. Even so, as I stuffed the paper in the filing cabinet, I found myself mumbling, “She's not coming back.” Funny, how at the same moment of new life, I felt aware—more than ever, of Clara's death. I repeated the words, “She's not coming back.”

But it wasn't about death; it was about movement and rhythm.

I went out into the kitchen a few minutes later. Mattie was reheating her dinner to take to her room. The microwave hummed and Mattie clinked the silverware on the counter while she waited. She looked up for a second but didn't say anything.

I smiled from the doorway, “Hey Mattie.”

Something in my voice cued her to look at me again. “Hey.”

I didn't say anything more. I was listening to the room. The clock ticked steadily, Mattie shuffled her feet on the tile floor, and the houseplant danced in the moonlight. Rhythm and music, I thought to myself. I walked up to Mattie and squeezed her from behind. She turned her head and began to let go but I kept holding on to her. I was afraid she would pull away, but then her body turned toward me. She held me tightly. With my head buried in her hair, I mumbled, “How are you, Mattie?”

“I'm okay, Mom.”

We pulled out of the embrace and held each other at arm's length. Mattie's eyes were glistening as she blinked rapidly. She hugged me tight again. “I miss Clara.”

“Me too.”

“I keep expecting her to walk through the door, smiling and happy. But she's not going to, Mom. She's not.”

I was crying now, too. “You're right, Mattie.”

“I don't understand.”

“Neither do I.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

For a few moments, time seemed to move slower. Everything was okay and everything wasn't okay. But no matter how slow it went, time still passed. The microwave beeped and the clock kept ticking. “There's nothing we're supposed to do, Mattie.”
Her head was resting on my shoulder and I felt her nod up and down. "But it's so hard. Every day, every hour, I'm either hurting or happy. And I don't even know why."

"But you keep on living, Mattie. You do what you know how to do and figure that eventually you'll catch up with the world."

The microwave started to beep again and Mattie escaped to get her food. Her eyes were moist as she gathered the plate, cup and silverware. Out of habit, she turned to leave the kitchen, but paused at the counter. She placed the food in front of her and sat down on a stool. Looking up at me she said, "Mom, will you stay with me while I eat?"

Her eyes met mine and I felt the room come to life with her words. Somewhere, I thought, Clara is scribbling arrows and spirals on a napkin. And right now, I am standing with Mattie as she eats dinner in the kitchen. I sat down next to her and we began to talk.