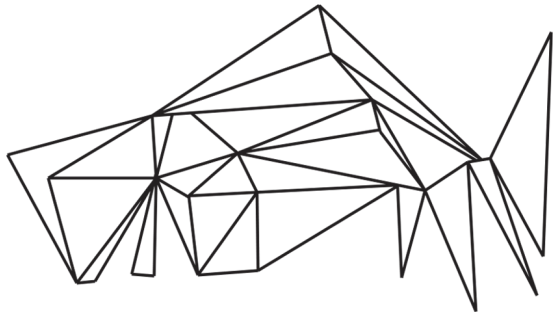


UC SAN DIEGO | DIVISION OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES | DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

HELWALKER

A Folk Opera Audio Drama by Barbara Byers

November 10, 2021



UC San Diego

ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Music

Helwalker is a folk opera audio drama which explores nature, decay and renewal in the context of a classic hero's journey narrative structure. The story centers around Spearwa, a Viking Shieldmaiden who is wounded in battle and separated from her companions. Spearwa is discovered by a Carrion Beetle and tricked into entering the earth through a door newly opened by the roots of a fallen oak tree. Realizing her predicament, Spearwa flees into an earthen labyrinth, pursued by the Carrion Beetle and a merry band of scavengers. After many adventures beneath the earth's surface, Spearwa emerges, emotionally and magically transformed by her experience.

The Oak Tree Stewards

<i>Music</i>	-	Barbara Byers
<i>Libretto</i>	-	Barbara Byers
<i>Song Lyric contribution</i>	-	Daniel Byers
<i>Musical Director</i>	-	Kyle Adam Blair
<i>Conductor</i>	-	Jonathan Stallings
<i>Movement Consultation</i>	-	Melissa Cisneros
<i>Audio Recording</i>	-	Douglas Osman Nathaniel Haering
<i>Sound Editing</i>	-	Barbara Byers
<i>Origami</i>	-	Alex Taylor

The Oak Tree Band

<i>Piano</i>	-	Kyle Adam Blair
<i>Double Bass</i>	-	Kathryn Schulmeister
<i>Trombone</i>	-	Berk Schneider
<i>Drumset</i>	-	Joseph Bourdeau

The Oak Tree Singers

<i>Spearwa</i>	-	Lizze Fisher
<i>Carrion Beetle</i>	-	Barbara Byers
<i>Hel</i>	-	Barbara Byers Mariana Flores Julia Yu

<i>Leech</i>	-	Alex Taylor
<i>Companion 1</i>	-	Miguel Zazueta-cervera
<i>Companion 2</i>	-	Julia Yu
<i>Scavengers</i>	-	Mariana Flores Isabella Panagiotou Alex Taylor Julia Yu Miguel Zazueta-cervera
<i>Earth Creature Voice Overs</i>	-	Joseph Bourdeau Barbara Byers Julia Yu
<i>Dancers</i>	-	Joseph Bourdeau Barbara Byers Julia Yu

Duration

Music - 1hr 30mn

Characters/Concept Descriptions

Spearwa

Spearwa is a Viking Shieldmaiden. She is a warrior through and through and her motivation is single-mindedly to get back to the fight and help her fellow warriors. Yet she is wounded and has been driven far from the battlefield. Coaxed into the underworld by a hungry Carrion Beetle, Spearwa must fight a different kind of battle to make her way back to the earth's surface. Spearwa must struggle at the mercy of a strange world and sort through the emotional battles of the unknown. She sees a world larger and more ferocious than her, feels loss and hopelessness, has a transformation and in the end, emerges from the darkness with an expanded perspective.

Carrion Beetle

The Carrion Beetle has one motivation; eat eat eat, and it's hungry and impatient and a bad little bug. It knows better, it really does, but it wants to eat Spearwa up so badly that it tricks her into entering the underworld even though she is still alive, hoping that the strange land will drain Spearwa quickly and turn her into the feast the bug salivates for. When Spearwa escapes, the FEB is distressed, but soon realizes there's a whole battlefield of corpses to maw on close by, and runs off, forgetting about the entire previous ordeal.

Hel

Hel is steward of the underworld. Plants grow from her body and she tends both the living and the dead, keeping the processes of decay and renewal in their constant co-creative cycle. She knows all and sees all and loves all. She is also, in her infinite wisdom and prescience, a bit mischievous. The Oak Tree Chorus represents the collective embodiment of Hel. They are the elements, animals, and plants, combining their individual voices to create a legion of the cycles of decay and renewal.

Narrative Context

In Norse mythology, Hel, daughter of Loki, is the ruler of the underworld. In popular interpretations, the underworld is a swampy, gloomy, horrible place where people who aren't slain in battle have to wait out eternity in boredom, sorrow, and forgetfulness. There is a different theory, however, which I like better: the underworld is in fact the earth itself. When bodies are buried in a mound, the earth, and everything in it which surrounds the dead (microbes, bugs, worms, roots...) *is* the underworld. The dead don't go to another realm, they go literally into the earth. This is the inspiration for my own interpretation of the entity Hel. I imagine that if Hel's realm is the earth and all that goes on within it, that she is more of a steward than a monarch, a guiding energy rather than an individual being. She makes pathways for decomposition and decay which feed life, guiding the ecosystems through cycles of growth, flourish, decay and renewal. I imagine she also is supportive of some occasional mischief. In the context of this dissertation, Hel is collectively played by the Oak Tree Chorus.

Narrative Overview

We begin with an old oak tree, which might be Yggdrasil. Oak trees are famous for being luscious life-bringers. They are full of nutrients and when they fall over and decay, life springs up around them like around no other tree.

This oak, weathered and rotted through, finally falls over in a heavy storm.

Spearwa, a Viking Shieldmaiden, enters mid-duel. She wins but is wounded, and sits down in the fallen oak to rest. She is intent on getting back to the fight.

A Carrion Beetle crawls out of the tree and finds Spearwa. Seeing her wounds, CB anticipates a feast to come and, impatient for the meal, lures Spearwa to the gates to the underworld (newly opened with the recently fallen oak's root ball ripping up the earth) with promises of revelry and feasting. Realizing she's been tricked and is somewhere she doesn't belong, Spearwa flees into an earthen labyrinth to try to find a way out.

Spearwa is hunted in the fashion of the mythical Wild Hunt by a plethora of hopeful Scavengers. As the hunt progresses, Spearwa is slowly losing energy and hope.

Spearwa is caught by a Leech who drains her of even more energy.

Hel, or the spirit of the fallen oak, plants an acorn in Spearwa's shoulder. This enables Spearwa to find a way out by climbing the root system of a new oak sapling now emerging from her shoulder. She is found by her companions, fresh from battle. They care for her and ask her where she has been. Spearwa still has the sapling growing out of her shoulder, which may represent how she has been changed by her journey. It may also mean that she has died, and her body will now nourish the new oak tree. Either way, through her journey and the wisdom of the tree she has been bonded with, Spearwa now feels the connection of all things in nature, recognizes the delicate balance of these systems, and appreciates the beauty and mystery of the earth.

The forces of Decomposition sing to close out the show.

End.

The lyric material revolves around poems I have written about moments in nature and the sublime beauty of the natural world. This piece is an offering and a hope for care and stewardship in our beautiful, imperilled world.

Songs

Helwalker

(Lyric base by Daniel Byers, edited for the opera by Barbara Byers)

[CB]
Nightshadows call,
Echoing back
Enter the hall,
A Helwalker's path!

These oaken roots did rend a roar
Releasing stone and soil
Follow me into the earthen labyrinth
Clutch and wretch and shake off your warrior's coil

[Spearwa]
From battle I was driven far,
Now I'm seeking hall and friend,
But the gates of Hel are all I see ahead,
Is this my end?

[Instrumental]

[CB]
Nightshadows fall,
Echo and crack,
Enter the Hall,
The Helwalker's Path!

[CHORUS]
Nightshadows fall
Fire and ash
Nightshadows fall
Exile's path
Nightshadows fall
Fire and ash

[Chorus 2]

[CHORUS]
In gore gear grim we stand
[Bugs Chorus]
the dead will deathless call
[ALL]
together we raise a song of rot
We stand before you

[Spearwa]

A proud young thane now wretched,
Hall-bereft I roam,
And wander toward these earthen walls,
A coffin made of stone,
A coffin made of stone

[CB]

My fellows, come and greet our guest,
There's nowhere left to run,
For even the gods will die,
When the wolf devours the sun!
When the wolf devours the sun!

[CHORUS]

Nightshadows fall,
Echo and crack,
Enter the Hall,
A Helwalker's Path!

[Chorus 2]

In gore gear grim we stand
the dead will deathless come

[ALL]

together we raise a song of de-
-cay, follow our tune

[Instrumental]

(slow, meditative build) 4X

[CHORUS+CB]

In gore gear grim we stand
the dead will deathless rise
together we raise a song for you
We stand before

[Spearwa]

Beneath this mountain, fire stained,
Shrouded, myred waste

[CHORUS]

Nothing of your hopes remain,

[CB]

Come now to our embrace!

[Spearwa]

Horse and bridle, they are gone,
My bright will turned to rust,

[CB]

Beneath the night-helm we will lift the song,

[All]

Fate goes as it must!

[Chorus 4X]

[Beetle]

Nightshadows fall,
Echo and crack,
Enter my Hall,
The Helwalker's Path!

[Chorus]

Nightshadows fall,
Echo and crack,
Enter the Hall,
The Helwalker's Path!

Appalachian Hel

Hel opened her oaken door
As I walked
The air was drawn
And the sun flew on
And the mists drew
hmm

Hel stood by her oaken door
As I looked in
On her head a crown
And her hands hung down
And her breath smelled like
Hmm

I'll stay a while in her dark Hall
I'll wander, I'll wander
I'll breath the echoes in the walls

[Hel]

I open my oaken door
So you can walk here

[Spearwa]

The air is thick
And my breath draws quick
As my blood slows
Hmm

[All]

I'll stay a while in your dark Hall
I'll wander, I'll wander
I'll build my bones into the walls

Hel, Hel

Your lips blue as a corpse

Hel, Hel

I'll kiss your blue corpse lips
I'll wander in your kiss

The Earth

[Leech and Maggot]

A feast is coming
see them on the run
the moth plays at dusk
With the candle on
flitting in the ash
Dancing in the ember
The moth seeks your memories
To drink and remember

[Spearwa]

What is this? (*disgusted, pokes at a mound*)

[Leech and Maggot]

A surge slicks and gathers
as the dim light dies
you can't see them slipping now
But you can still hear their cries
Ash-choked in the dancing dust
Shadow-flickers scattered in ember
The worms seek your memory
To clutch on, rip up, rend and dismember

[Spearwa] Where is the sun, the wind? I need some air...

[CB] Isn't there air enough in the soil? Filtered, clean air.

[Leech and Maggot]

rot-ruptured blood clots ooze
blue faces fixed

gnashing about your body
all wriggling bits
deconstructing your flesh fortress
Reaching for you, bone by bone
The beetles seek your memory

[Spearwa]

Where is the feast you spoke of Beetle? It is close and dark here. I wish to leave now.

[CB]

Shh! She's just getting to the good part!

[Leech and Maggot]

you can't fight the lure of earth forever
holed up behind those hollow groans
Moth and men both find the fire
making ash from bone
The air meets the ash
The sun heats the skin
The earth keeps your memories

[CB and Scavengers]

Now let the earth in!!!

Scavengers

[CB]

I seek you
Strewn on a quaking branch

[Chorus]

Your clouded eyes
Blue as ice

[CB]

Those un-frothed veins
Thick fermentation
Sun baked
Is a feast for me
By oak fall

[Chorus]

We have such hungry eyes

[CB]

Your wound
Is my well

[CB]

Heave in the belly, a scavenger's steal
Give the gift of this final extraordinary meal

We tear ourselves from our dens, lift our heads and catch the air
Find our way to sweet decay
We hungry scavengers

[Chorus]

Drag dig
Dismember it

[CB]

Corpse teeth gnashers
Worm dance kings
Maggot hosts and mound rowers
Descend on the branches of oak and decay
To capture this chance for a feasting day

[Chorus]

Feast for me
By the tree we eat
We feast
Feast for me I seek
Hungry
Find the fleeing beast
Ah! Find her, Catch her!

The Wild Hunt

Verse 1

[Spearwa]

Something, something is hunting me

[Hel]

You
You are hunted
I am hunting

[Hel and Scavengers]
We are hunting
We are we are
Watching from a shadow

[Spearwa]
It's far too quiet, it's far too calm
The wind is picking up

[Spearwa, Hel, Scavengers]
It sways, cool, afternoon
Clouds, the birds

[Spearwa]
Are singing
Softly the birds are singing

Verse 2

[Spearwa]
Something
Something is watching me

[Hel]
Hidden in the hunt
Beneath a heavy branch

[Spearwa]
The water is still
And there's only an echo of distant thunder

[Hel and Spearwa]
The wind is settling
And the butterflies
Glide soundlessly
The butterflies glide soundlessly

Verse 3

[Spearwa]
There's something in the water

[Hel]
Lying in wait beneath the sandy bank

[Scavengers]
A sandy bank
Constant
quiet

[Hel, Spearwa]
Only the quiet constant march of molecules

[Hel, Scavengers]
Molecules
Molecules cause quivering

[Hel, Spearwa]
The wind is still and the trees are stiller

[Hel]
And two toads escape under a spruce

Verse 4

[Spearwa]
I can speak to devils
Peering from the shadows of St. John's Wart

[Scavengers]
We're dressed as the impossible stillness
Of the meadow
We're wearing trees
Singing with a wind

[Spearwa]
The wind feels
Too far away

[Spearwa, Scavengers]
And the birds are getting louder

Verse 5

[Scavengers]
We're preparing for a storm
Through the heavy sky
Just now a wound of blue broke
Everything's peculiar and still
But for the birds
The wind begins to nudge the grasses
And the river's pace cuts faster
And the devils clasp their hands beneath their hearts
Grinning thirsty

Verse 6

[Spearwa]
There's something behind me

[Scavengers]
Hungry

[CB]
I am waiting in St. John's Field
Leaping in the glade
Lighting in the shadowy cover of maidenhair

[CB, Scavengers]
Hungry
Hungry for you

[Spearwa]
Something passes close
A breeze, or a flickering of light

[Scavengers]
I am twisting on a cinquefoil bed
Hungry

[Hel]
Tuck
And cover
Don't you think it's time to see
Where the water strider catches your dreams

[Spearwa]

I feel
Tired like the sun covered in clouds

[Hel]
Clouds feasting on a shoulder of sound

[Spearwa]
Wake me when the sun returns

[Hel]
Let the field
St. John, cinquefoil and dewberry
Lull you into quiet ease
As the sweat bee conspires with the ants
To tickle your toes

[Spearwa]
The crickets arrive
Keeping time with temperature

[Hel, Spearwa]
The wind is still and waltzing on the hill
And the sky is darkening

Verse 7

[Spearwa]
This feeling beside me

[Hel, Scavengers]
Playing with the hair on the back of your neck
The back of your neck

[Spearwa]
The ferns are shaking

[Hel, Spearwa]
And St. John's field appears to walk

[Hel, Scavengers]
With roots stretched
Half concealed
Baring earth
earth-bound moss

Gathers moisture
Measuring minerals
And the ground is growing

[Hel, Scavengers, Spearwa]
The ground is growing

Verse 8

[Hel, Spearwa]
The shadows are alive
There's poetry compiling

[Scavengers]
Compiling

[Hel, Spearwa]
Devils

[Scavengers]
Devils! Devils under St. John!

[Spearwa]
Shade unseen watchers

[Hel, Spearwa]
Watchers weave, weave, watchers weave the words

[Hel, Spearwa]
Hunters weave
Hunters stretch
Stretch stanzas
Stanzas made of wind
Coiled up air

[Spearwa]
It's what I hear

[Hel, Spearwa]
It's all

[Spearwa]
It's all that isn't there
And it's all

Spearwa's Sorrow

[Spearwa]
In a dungeon
under oak-fall I lay

Casting my lonely breath in that special way
I sigh to the host of spiders
And pull my sad flesh on the ground
And ask if I'll last
Till morning comes

Cause it's hard for me to keep going
And I don't know why I'm alone
And it's too hard to find a way out
I'm all tangled up in this oak

In a dungeon
The ceiling and the walls dripping sorrow
I cast about
Moldy breathed
And heart hollow
I sigh with a host of spiders
And pull my body, a bag of bones
And I ask you, will I last till morning comes?

But it's too hard for me to keep going
And I don't know why I'm alone
And it's too hard to find a way out
I'm all tangled up under this oak

In a dungeon
The air doesn't feel quite right!
It's stale and appeals to the worms and the crickets
So pale, it seems like you can see right through them..

Cause it's too hard for me to keep going
And I don't know why I'm alone

Bag of Bones

[Spearwa]

When I wake up in the morning
With that feeling in my gut
Enough weight to fill a Leech's bucket

[All]

And leave you bloodless

[Leech]

Well I descend upon your eyes
And say it's good for you

[Spearwa]

You bleed my heart and you bleed my tongue

[Leech]

Cause that's what Leeches do, Oh
Cause that's what Leeches do

[Spearwa]

Oh when I wake up in the morning
And I want to fall back down
Bleeding from my fingernails and ears
Enough blood to sink this town, Oh
Enough blood to sink this town

[All]

A Bag of Bones
A Bag of bones
A bag of bones
A bag of
Sleep Bones

[Leech]

Well i suckle on your spine
And say you'll soon wake up
I bleed your hope and I bleed your time
Till it overflows my cup, oh
Till it overflows my cup

[All]

A bag of bones....

{Instrumental}

[Spearwa]

When I wake up in the morning

Breath of dust, a heavy head

[Leech]

Enough leech buckets filled to leave you bloodless

A bag of bones instead

[All]

A bag of bones....

The Screaming Tree

[Hel]

A bitter sweet acorn births a screaming tree

[All]

A screaming tree

[Hel]

A ready seed tangles up in eros

A glint of red

That plunges toward

A shrieking cortex

[Spearwa, Scavengers]

Tied to reach that color red

Dead set to reach that color

[Hel, Scavengers]

Unblinking golden glittering thread of gore

Surrounds the seed

[Scavengers]

The seed that cries out endlessly in pitch

And echoes in her threadbare mingling

[Hel]

Her scent inspires

Worms all wound-up

[Hel, Scavengers]
Stretching for dirt
Leaving trails a'gleam

With a twisted, desperate admiration

[Spearwa]
Caught and elevating in that molten taste of want

[Hel]
Desire leaves you

[Scavengers]
A screaming tree

[Spearwa]
Reaching for
A dish of sun

[Hel]
Fit to serve a queen
The sapling

The Return

[Companion 1]
Hey
Why do you look so grim
There's something lingering
Something hard to identify
Where have you been?

[Companion 2 and Chorus]
We found her under oaken branches
She's been wounded

---dialogue Bars 22-30---

[Spearwa]
I could expand to be the whole of the earth, feel it's every shake and shudder, I can feel birds landing on pine branches, bears plucking berries off their thorny stalks, and beware truffles! No

pig needed to find you now! I don't need to go anywhere, or think about anything, I'll just stay here in this infinite beauty...

[Companion 1]

Hey

I don't know where you've been

Hold on, hold on

You're covered in

The scent of

Hmm

[Chorus]

Hold on

[Spearwa]

Hey

I got caught up in the sun

Stepped on a butterfly

Tore the colors

Turned the nektar red

And watched it

Watched it struggling

[Chorus]

Hold on (I got caught up in the sun)

[Spearwa]

Hey

I've been dried up by the raging daylight

Sucked up by butterflies

Turned to nektar

Bones, bones burned to red

And marrow trembling

[Beetle]

There are no remains for me

[Chorus]

Hold, hold on

---Dialogue moment Bars 107-112---

[Companion 1]

Eck! Out, beetle!

(Flicks Beetle away)

Go a field over, gross thing, there's plenty for you to eat there! You'll not have Spearwa for a meal today.

[CB]

(Sniffs the air. Follows excitedly a new smell)

Hel! Hel, I've caught something! There is a feast on the wind! Plenty for everyone!

[Hel]

Then go, little Beetle. Do your good work. Clean the bones and make ready the earth for new life.

[Spearwa]

The rainbow passage

Torn and drifting away

A feeling somehow unsettles

I fell in the frame

Pursued by Hel's hungry wards

finding a sapling

I ascended

The roots

Decomposition

[All]

On an edge

The shattered oak gathers time

A cynic's humour

Show us the passage

Hold the flame

Gesture to the coming creatures

Dried and cracked we come

In stupored staggered features

Lie down

Half buried dirt maggot feast

The creatures coming for you

Are the ones you love the least

Stripped, your armored skin melts in our mouths

We sigh, and shiver for your corpse

Your last breath dissipates into ash

A host that you've seen before

But this time it's you that they approach
The worm, the beetle and the roach
The worm, the beetle and the roach

X2

You're a feeding frenzy
A hollowed out skin
Bones cracked, consumed, choked on
Spewed
up
thing

Gripped, you dessicate before our eyes
We cry and wiggle for your demise
We come to masticate, muscilate
A dance that you've seen before
But this time it's you that we enfold
The worm the beetle and the roach
The worm the beetle and the
Slime mold

X2

You're a feeding frenzy
A hollowed out skin
Bones cracked, consumed, choked on
Spewed up thing

Lie down
Half consumed
resign to the host
The creatures coming for you are the ones
That eat the most

Desiccated by design

Time rips, defiles and rots
The sun shreds
Memory masticates and spits
Covering all that is left
In your rejected
Your rejected bits

Lie no more
Forgotten, cast out, claimed

The creatures that devour you
Will come
For us
Will come for us the same

You're a feeding frenzy
A hollowed out skin
Bones cracked, consumed, choked on
Spewed up thing...