

An Archive of the musical compositions by Herb Bielawa

Composition: **Stone Settings** – voice and piano

Swan Song 1:44

Love as a Second Language 2:38

Coda for a Lover 2:49

The Marriage House 2:20

Nightland 4:17

Date: 1991

Duration: 15:53

Recording: by Marian Marsh, soprano; Herb Bielawa, piano

Program Note:

Since Arlene Stone's poems in this set were not specifically written for music, the compositional challenges were significant. When such poetry is emotionally evocative and vividly graphic in its imagery, it lends itself more naturally to declamatory and rhapsodic musical gestures. The texts seem to defy melodiousness, even though I strived hard for such tuneful moments. I had also made a compositional decision early on for these pieces. I wanted them to be more triadic harmonically in spite of the complicated nature of the texts. As a result a kind of surrealism exists in these songs, I think. As with much of my songs, the emotional tension and pictorial characteristics of the texts I set are etched quite deeply into the piano accompaniment. It is as if the voice declares the verbal meaning of the text and the accompaniment evokes its feelings. I came upon the poetry of Arlene Stone when I met her at Villa Montalvo, an artists' retreat in Saratoga, California. The songs are a culmination of a collaboration that we had while at Montalvo.

Texts by Arlene Stone:

Swan Song

The window is closed
as the mother watches the daughter
waltz in the garden
with the hose that is swan
the mother tapping her toes
pumping the heat's barrel organ
ballads
of blood and women
swan lifting its head
from the meadow of breast
the swan a copperhead
the mother's breath a snare drum
Snake
mistaking the beat
of fear for fury
lets out a long red hiss
The daughter is closed like a book
and the mother opens the sky

Love as a Second Language

Phones
that ring in the night
where the conspiratorial cat
in Satiny sleep
has knocked noise off the hook
& attached itself like a barnacle
to a warm mossy rock
It has married me for the night
this fur spirit
usurping my navel
cutting me loose from you
just five miles distant
your cries garbled in sheets
of fast dissolving freezing snow
By the time the phone is replaced
in its cradle
your face is formed rigid & blank
as a sculpture in ice
morning become
the language of loss

Coda for a Lover

Among a hundred
in the dark
blindfolded I
would know you
the texture of
every page
the watermarks
creases
wounds I fondle
The words that were
your face
What have I
put into your
royal body
tears saliva
sweat
blood of
a poet
the pages torn
beyond repair
easy to read
my favorite book
tired as last
year's best-seller
I must lay
you away love
my bible
too slim a guide
for a lifetime
I put you upon
a shelf to
lose you
Sweet preface to
death I must
have a book with
a spine

The Marriage House

The breaking dishes burst like bombs
Doors torn off like fingernails
The plaster crumbles like soft bread
Our house struggling to get back
its breath
its bones
to splint
to truss
to salve
to hold
The house that drunk
sping it off
as the cat sits washing
washing herself

Nightland

Sitting at night on the bridge
that demarcates friend from lover
dangling our feet
giving them time to decide
whether to go back the way they came
or advance into the tenuous land
where touch is reconciled with feeling
like light with dark at the horizon
or son with mother
We stepped down with trepidation
into the leafy grotto
the trees a green
memorized and blotted
their trunks dark hairs
magnified a million times
sky too remote to consider
the lap of the brook as lean
as the suck of a sleeping child
Below us the stones are persons
we don't have to get to know
hand dangling from cords
receivers knocked off phones
dial tones
circumfluent as shells
Whisks of a night broom
Charcoal streaks of a ghetto
Black slashes outline you
The are no wild animals here
You said
0 crouching bear

