

Hanford Songs

Four Poems by Kathleen Flenniken

for Soprano and String Quartet

Reginald Unterseher

Again I'm Asked If I Glow In The Dark
Interlude for Dancers
Augean Gray (IV. from "Augean Suite")
Rattlesnake Mountain

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AGAIN I'M ASKED IF I GLOW IN THE DARK

What glowed in childhood
was streetlight, moonlight,
the crack under my bedroom door, my
eyes, squeezed tight for a fireworks show.

Four houses up the street,
Carolyn's mother could never sleep.
The blue flicker of Johnny Carson.
The bright lamp of her sewing machine.

Occasional headlights crawling across
my shelf of dolls. Their nonchalance.
The face in my poster of *Neuschwanstein*.
The face on the clock.

I revisit those nights at night, and the night
beyond me— the river, the trains, the dust—
revising my past. Enlightened.
So yes.

This question is one that anyone who has lived in the Tri-Cities for any length of time has heard. The activities “out at the area” are widely misunderstood by people both inside and outside of the region, a legacy of the culture of secrecy that accompanied the dawn of the nuclear age and persisted through the Cold War. Some dangers are ignored and suppressed while others are the subject of wild speculation. This poem is indeed a “song of innocence and experience,” the point of view of a child looking and listening in the night, and the reflections of an adult. Carolyn, in the poem, is Kathleen’s best friend in childhood, whose father worked at Hanford and later died of a radiation-induced illness.

The first sound we hear in this setting is a high harmonic from the first violin, a sound I associate with the Civil Defense warnings I remember from my childhood (including “Duck and Cover” drills) and with the threat of incoming missiles and bombs, as well as those hard to identify machine noises that we hear in the quiet of night. In an area like the Tri-Cities with such an open landscape and little nighttime traffic, you can also hear trains from very far away, their regular clicking and rolling sounds seeming to come from everywhere, but faintly.

INTERLUDE FOR DANCERS

—*Richland, 1969*

A somersaulting boy
plays a tumbleweed
while three ballerinas dance
their role as the wind—
hair loose, skirts thick,
their crinolines caked
with dust. Remember?
we say in the audience,
elbowing each other.
Remember sand
in our eyes and mouths,
residents quitting in droves
blown out of town by gusts
we called *termination*?
Leather-soled
government men step out
to pas-de-deux with our
dust storms, who extend
en pointe and pirouette,
their eyes finely lashed
and batting back grit
against a backdrop of brown
Horse Heaven Hills.
How beautiful! we might say
or anyway, How tragic!
as the men attend
and the prickly boy
tumbles and clowns.
The hometown girls
make good— they billow
and blast, ripple like flags,
and lob loose clods
of earth. Look at them...
Look at what art we make!
But what the wind blows in,
it blows along.
And we are what's left.

The wind and blowing dust was often the first thing that workers dealt with upon arrival in the Tri-Cities, especially in the early days of the 40's and 50's. These dust-ups were called "termination winds" because these 40-70 mile an hour wind storms picked up large volumes of sand and grit, especially in the areas newly disturbed by construction, and blasted the unsuspecting workers on the site as well as everyone in town. These storms prompted many workers to quit their jobs and leave the area rather than face a second occurrence.

This poem recalls a scene from a local ballet performance in 1969. The last lines capture so well the history of a group of small towns built around the transient nature of the work and workers. This poem is dedicated to dancers Nora Parkhurst, Lisa Peterson, and Paula Prewett; to teacher Lois Rathvon, and to Carolyn's daughter, Marisa.

A fast waltz, we hear both the grace and awkwardness of the scene as it plays out in front of us. The singer and string players dance with each other, sometimes taking the part of the folks on stage, sometimes those in the audience.

AUGEAN GRAY (IV. from *Augean Suite*)

Women,
 take off your
 dresses
 and undergarments,
 You babies,
 crawl naked
in the grass.
 Lie down all of you
 under the August sky,
 and nobody ask.
 Questions alarm
and weaken
 our nation.

It is snowing.

 Your men are at work making snow.

 I will go first and close my eyes,
 cross the distance

between here

and winter.

Lie down, patriot.

Don't ask.

The fourth in a series of six poems called "Augean Suite," all the poems reference the fifth labor of Hercules, which was to clean the Augean Stables. This was a daunting task, as the cattle were immortal, produced an enormous amount of dung, and the stables had not been cleaned in thirty years. Hercules' solution was to reroute the Alpheus and Peneus rivers to wash the filth down to the sea.

In this poem, and in the third poem of the suite, there is reference to snow in August. A total of 166 documented radionuclides were released into the atmosphere from the Hanford facility during its active production lifespan. After World War II a new type of chemical process was developed to recover plutonium from irradiated fuel. This "reduction-oxidation" process known as "Redox" for short, created a flaky byproduct that included radioruthenium, Ru-106. This material is very "hot" radiologically, but it has a very short half-life, which makes it a very dangerous but temporary problem. In 1952, shortly after Redox plant operations had begun, technicians discovered particles occasionally "large enough to be seen by the unaided eye" with snowflake-like radioruthenium particles occasionally observed several inches in diameter. The largest reported release was in January 1954 when nearly 260 curies were released from the Redox plant. Technicians observed these particles 150 miles northeast in Spokane and later discovered traces of the same airborne particles in northeastern Montana in 1954.

This setting is a still scene, with the heartbeat in the cello, the distant warning sirens, and the slowly descending high notes similar to those at the opening of the first song, ominous and indistinct, like those tall smoke stacks we can barely see from so far away.

RATTLESNAKE MOUNTAIN

We claim it's the tallest treeless mountain
in the world, which is only true
if you behold it—

mistress of dust storms, wildfires,
windswept and monochrome— and acknowledge
we live exposed to the planets here,

that the mountain's folds and shadows
roll with stars, soft April greens, and lupine,

belying missile silos hidden in catacombs

and the waste of 50 years of atomic bombs.
Our families all came from elsewhere,
and regarded the desert as empty,

and ugly, which gave us permission
to savage the land. The mountain,
figure in repose, looked on

as we buried what we buried at its hem.
Desert turned vineyard, orchard, strip mall,
houses in every shade of beige.

This radioactive burial ground
and the hills along its edge are the last
unbroken stretch of shrub-steppe remaining.

I left the mountain half my life ago
to live among trees,
and now— an exile— I understand

what beautiful ghost rises up in the distance
in my dreams. Now I know
this ruined place is sacred.

This long hill, 3,527 feet tall, dominates the Tri-Cities skyline. The Yakama Nation referred to Rattlesnake Mountain as Lalíik, meaning "land above the water." Some historians speculate that the origin of the name Lalíik refers to the inundation of the Columbia River Plateau during the Missoula Floods, as Rattlesnake would have been one of the few mountains not completely covered by flood waters. Lalíik is held sacred by native peoples of the Columbia Plateau, including the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Wanapum, Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Yakama, and remains a spiritual epicenter to this day.

One factor that made Hanford attractive for the nuclear reservation was the isolation and security that the treeless, sagebrush covered shrub-steppe landscape provided. Ironically, this need for security and space around the nuclear facilities created "the last unbroken stretch of shrub-steppe," which is now part of the Arid Lands Ecology Reserve.

The flanks of Rattlesnake Mountain contained missile silos, intended to protect the site from Soviet bombers, as well as a bomb shelter for selected "high-value" residents in the event of a nuclear attack. As technology developed, and the threat came from ICBM's rather than bombers, the missile silos were repurposed, and currently serve as the site of gravitational wave experiments, among others. These

facilities are nearly invisible until you are upon them, and exploring the tunnels and walkways is a stunning experience.

This song is preceded by an interlude for string quartet alone. In the interlude and the song, I incorporate the long, arching shape of the hill, the movement of wind in the grass, and the combination of stillness and activity that those desert hills contain, and the amazing contradiction of the location of a Superfund site, one of the most polluted places on earth, whose existence preserved the last remaining free-flowing stretch of the Columbia River.

Reginald Unterseher is Music Director and Composer-in-Residence at Shalom United Church of Christ, Richland, Washington. His works are published by Oxford University Press, Walton Music, and from his web site, www.reginaldunterseher.com. He is a founding member of Northwest Choral Publishers with Karen P. Thomas and John Muehleisen.

Mr. Unterseher's compositions are regularly performed throughout the world and have been featured at regional and national ACDA and MENC conventions in the US as well as at Carnegie Hall in New York City. He currently serves as Repertoire & Standards Chair for Men's Choirs for the Northwest Division of the American Choral Director's Association, and is in demand as a choral and vocal adjudicator and clinician. Mr. Unterseher is a past Artistic Director of Consort Columbia (now Mid-Columbia Mastersingers), founder and past Chorus Master of Washington East Opera, and an active member of Male Ensemble Northwest.

As a voice teacher, Mr. Unterseher is an active member of the Washington State Music Teacher's Association. For the last two years, he has had students in the finals of the National Senior Voice Competition. This year, his student Vanessa Vega placed third. Former students include successful teachers, performers, conductors, and actors, including Santino Fontana, this year's Tony Award nominated Best Leading Actor In A Musical.

Mr. Unterseher is Composer-In-Residence for the upcoming United Church of Christ Musician's Association national conference. The week's activities will include the premiere of "Border" for chorus and organ, conducted by Dennis Coleman of the Seattle Men's and Women's Choruses, with organist Douglas Cleveland, at St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle on July 18.

Veteran's Day, 2013, will bring the premiere of "Here, Bullet," seven songs for tenor, chorus, and piano in Salem, Oregon. The poems were written by Brian Turner during his time as an infantry team leader in Iraq.

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Kathleen Flenniken is the 2012 – 2014 Poet Laureate of Washington State. Her first book, *Famous* (University of Nebraska, 2006), won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize and was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. Her collection, *Plume* (University of Washington Press, 2012), is a meditation on the Hanford Nuclear Site in Washington State, and was a finalist for the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. Flenniken's other honors include a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Pushcart prize.

"I came to poetry late, after working eight years as a civil engineer and hydrologist, three on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. I started writing when I quit work to stay home with my young children. I took a night class in poetry--and I've taken it seriously ever since. For years my subject was my daily domestic life. I saw myself as a natural historian of interiors. This is the focus of *Famous*. In 2004 I started (without recognizing it at first) a very different project, and for close to six years I wrote almost exclusively about Hanford, where plutonium was produced for 40 years, and about its bedroom community, my home town, Richland, Washington. *Plume*, the resulting full-length collection of poems, is part memoir, part history lesson, part cautionary tale, part quest. It is at its heart a search for identity, as I have tried to synthesize the truths of my childhood with the environmental facts. I've learned from the sustained examination of one all-consuming subject. Now I am at work on a new obsession—my own problematic, star-crossed love affair with my country, and my parallel relationship with romance itself."

www.kathleenflenniken.com

www.kathleenflenniken.com/plume.html

Molly Holleran, soprano teaches voice in Richland, Washington. Originally from Wisconsin, she received bachelor's degrees in vocal performance and theatre from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. Her master's degree in vocal performance is from the University of Arizona. Since moving to the Tri-Cities in 2008, Molly has been active as a performer with Richland Light Opera Company (now known as the Mid-Columbia Musical Theatre), Richland Players, CBC Summer Showcase, Mid-Columbia Mastersingers, and as a soloist with the Mid-Columbia Symphony, Oregon East Symphony and Walla Walla Symphony.

Mary K. French, violin 1 earned a Masters in Music, (Violin Performance), from the University of Idaho in 2006. Previously she was given a place at the Aspen Music Festival with Dorothy DeLay. She has been a featured soloist, playing with the University of Wyoming Chamber Orchestra, Mid-Columbia Symphony and Eastern Washington Chamber Orchestras. Presently she serves as Concertmaster of the Mid-Columbia Symphony, import musician to other Symphonies in the region, and maintains a large violin/viola studio.

Heather Hull Hart, violin 2 has a Master of Music degree in choral conducting from the University of Washington, and a Bachelor's degree in Music (Piano and Violin) from Northwest Nazarene University (Idaho). She plays violin in the Mid-Columbia Symphony, teaches private music lessons, and is the Artistic Director of the "forte!" high school show choir, and Director of Marketing & Entertainment for the Pasco Farmers Market.

Amelia Kittson, viola studies with Tim Betts of Central Washington University, and this fall will attend Washington State University to study viola performance with Dr. Meredith Arksey on an undergraduate string quartet scholarship. She plays with the Mid-Columbia Musical Theater, Mid-Columbia Symphony, Columbia Basin College Symphony, and Eastern Washington University Symphony. She recently won the Robert W. Richardson Memorial Award, an regional music scholarship competition for graduating seniors.

Michelle Cameron, cello is a scientist who plays music as her alter ego. She has been a cellist for 33 years, enjoying playing all kinds of music from classical to folk.

special thanks to:

Justin Raffa, *quartet manager*

Sheila Dunlop, *poem wrangler*

Eastern Washington Academy of Music, *rehearsal space*

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