

St. Cecilia's daze. 2010

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St. Cecilia's Daze



Poetry by Katrin Talbot

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

St. Cecilia's Daze

Poetry by
Katrin Talbot



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I gratefully acknowledge the following journals, in which some of these poems previously appeared. *If Poetry Journal*: “Distinguished Bones”; *Fresh Ink*: “Every six months”; *Empty Shoes* (Popcorn Press): “With a comforting snap”; *Psychological Poems: Journal of Outsider Poetry*: “We’ve all known” and “Saving Heart”; *Chopin with Cherries, A Tribute in Verse* (Moonrise Press, 2010): “Sewing with Chopin” and “Mazurka vs. the Day”; *Wisconsin Poet’s Calendar* and *Anew Magazine*: “Unable to imagine”; and *Wisconsin Poet’s Calendar*: “Trio, après midi” and “Senescence.”

This collection of poems delineates moments in my life when music, dance, rhythm, breathing leave me shuddering with Emily Dickinson's 'fascinating chill', be it in joy or sorrow. Music slides through these poems and my life, as an essential force, as healer, as oxygen, as a release when wailing, howling is the only path, as a relentless reminder of the beat that drives us, sustains us, and can, at times, almost destroy us with its beauty. St. Cecilia, the patron saint of Music, has one day a year to be queen, but swims through my life on a daily basis.

— Katrin Talbot, May 2010

This collection is dedicated to those I know who live
on a diet of music and wonder.

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I

Recitative

A recitative is a musical style that brushes aside rhythm and metre in favour of a more declamatory delivery of a narrative. Most often found in opera, it gives the listener the gist of ‘what be hap’ . . .

E very six months
or so
I forget about
Rachmaninoff

And then,
amidst a train wreck of thoughts,
I switch on the car radio

His music beckons swiftly,
like a siren of old,
Gathering me into a passionate,
heartbreaking embrace
And I must pull over
to the gravelly, comforting
shoulder

Grab a road map so
as not to be perceived as
vagrant, loitering,
wayfarer, wistful

And listen
as my forgotten friend pulls me recklessly
along unpaved back roads
and leaves me
breathless with cadence

U nable to imagine a
more exquisite loneliness
as a sad Schubert piano sonata
accompanies the
dark sheets of rain
hanging on the clothesline
of a very late
spring

Wondering,
on a safely guarded precipice,
if all is as profound as I see it . . .

Is a simple chord progression
profound because I become
paralyzed by its beauty?

Isn't a baby's 27th step as astonishing
as its first?

Should we wonder daily
every sunrise
every sunset
every midday's shadowless pause
at the turning of the earth
& how our bicycle tires ignore latitude
in their own bumpy orbit?

Or only ponder the spinning earth when our
preschoolers turn the globe at dizzying speeds
or as we look at glossy flight patterns
in airline magazines
where the earth lies in tidy pressed pleats
upon the page?

Amazing, possibly impossible
that so many internal biological synapses occur
because, so that, in spite of
my need to write *these* thoughts
on *this* page?

Or is it naïveté that simmers quietly
in my soul
and this ambrosia of wonder
just too
damn
sweet?

Mazurka vs. the Day

There are mornings,
 Autumn Mornings so brilliant
 so articulated
 so crisp
When a Chopin Mazurka
 silently collides with
 the Day spirit

A day so radiant and joyful that
 a melancholy dance can
 only tug at the beauty

yearning for a joining,
 a fusion of unmeasurable
 sadness
 with dazzling spirit

and the Day
 Resists

BÉLA

The parting of time
pulling apart
peeling away

from the Greenwich line

Defined now by stabbing eighth notes
of a Bartók quartet

The players dictate,
with punctuations of
snapping, ticking
pizzicato,
a parallel
temporal universe,

infinitely separate
from that defined by
watches declaring their
staggered version of
Nine P.M. in
Atonal Beep

At 9:06 the tolling fades,
Audience safely returned to
Bartok Time Zone,

Passionately delineated by
heart-pounding Hungarian
instruments of

time

Sewing with Chopin

As needle and thread
 quieted the hem,
 Mazurkas
 too sad to dance to
 serenaded my stitching

 and the aching sadness
urged me to keep sewing
 all through the day,

 mending moments of
heartbreak, hope deferred,
 misty loss

while I sat across from Chopin
 and listened attentively
as he spoke so eloquently
 of the advantages of

 a delicate
 life

Trio, après midi

Steeping in Mendelssohn's
 majestic architectural splendour,
Ivory-towered musical evolution,
 my eyes wander from recital to sky
 through church windows,
Wright's spectacled view onto a Wisconsin hill,

 a crow
 hops from branch to branch,
 retching her simple song,
 a song emerging from
 HER evolved genes,
 kvetching about carrion,
 sounding an alarm,
 testing each branch's tonality

Hops across my paned gray view
 out of sight
 I drift back to Mendelssohn
 and my genetic rank

*Morning Cantata,
Umbrete, Spain*

The rooster crows too early to spark a morning
a declarative language I at last understand
in this country of song

Your breathing the dreaming
in and out and shudder in
nocturnal comprehension of
the new worlds you are surveying
these days

The clock a metronomed score of thoughts
The radiator crashing in two bars early,
like a jittery viola section

You still breathe, laboured,
inhaling seemingly vast and desperate
quantities of air for such
tiny lungs and years,
exhaling comparatively gently
with a resolution
as I lay beside you,

holding you and memories of
 other morning cantatas, other roosters
the throaty toy bantam
 heralding another bitter Montana morn,

the ubiquitous winter morning rains in Oregon,
 the chorus of migrating geese nesting in the field
 below the piney Canadian cow pasture where I had set up
 a trespasser's camp for a night,

the frightening silence of snow heavy upon my tent
 or the back-in-civilization bladed scrape
of snowplow
 as I lay buried under quilts

Forgetting suddenly the memories
 as the first motor bike of the morning
 declares its departure
 through the narrow village streets,
ripping open a new day
 as a child with presents

And this day's life
 begins to
 crescendo

Because he couldn't hear me

I thought of the sand composing the glass
 blocking my words
 and the sand that had blanketed his tomb
 blocking the light
 and armed with this parallel key,
I somehow slipped through the glass into the case
 in which he lay
 a lone
 ex posed
 un nurtured
 so far from his mother's noble arms

Gathered up mummy boy in my arms, ignoble
 held him in his leathery lonely state
 against my softer warmer breast
and whispered a dewy lullaby into his desiccated ear,
 a wordless strain because I'm not sure he ever knew
 German or English
and I think I heard him sigh,
 a four year-old
 four thousand year-old
 sigh

II

Scherzo

Scherzo means ‘joke’ and refers to an often playful musical style, dating back to Monteverdi’s choral *Scherzi* in the 1600s.

Senescence

Most of them

give it up gracefully
a quick float down
to close the parentheses

they know the leaf scene

the alarming increase in respiratory rate
a tarantella of O_2 - CO_2
the nasty accumulation of,
how do you say,
metabolic products
the telltale loss in dry weight . . .
and what leaf has anything to spare these days?

But did you happen to see

for godssakes
that one today with
black satin veins and
stiff golden cloak

barrel down,

screaming like a Helden tenor?
A veritable rage aria
amidst the whispers of
acquiescence
landing solidly in the middle of
the resolute final chord
his leafy libretto still floating behind

a Season of life
a Life of season

Too magnificent a finale
not to pick up the leaf
toss it to the stream
give him a coda,
a one last
histrionic odyssey
to fuss about

As the metronome crept reluctantly toward
dotted quarter = 116,
I glanced outside through the blinds
and mistook the
Linden tree and the
window panes
for a row of
admirers,
hanging on
my every sixteenth note,

Until I remembered that this morning,
my viola had mentioned,
calmly enough,
over coffee,
something about a
firing squad
And I don't think she was
reading the *Times*

Ear Strudel

As the 'cello and piano slowly
wove savory layers of Bloch,
the trade winds slipped
between them and
added rustle
of palm fronds
breezy shudder of mango leaves,
spiced with the
crescendoing and decrescendoing
of planes
buzzing the Coast

and I began to remember a
fine 1983 *börek* buttressed with
buttery filo dough

until the damn Chihuahua
barked
and I bit into a stale
m & m® in
layer seven

Life at Measure Forty-Four

This very morn
 I played a solemn
 chromatic scale
from the depths of the keyboard,
 M. Steinway listening critically

 As the ledger lines faded and emerged
 as I ascended,
I realized today that my years number
 half the standard piano keyboard
 and played out my life thus far . . .
slowly creeping between naturals and accidentals
 age 16 seemed two octaves, really,
 above 15,
while the 32nd and 35th notes sounded
 the same—ebony and ivory not clearly delineated

 The question is, from where do I begin?
 Would one start on the highest ivory
 and begin a descent to define a life,
accruing a depth of wisdom
 or
 creep up towards an expected enlightened state
that sometimes accompanies longevity?

 As I'm currently living in the comfort zone
 where Bach wrote his Preludes and Fugues,
where life still make sense
 in these keys,
I think I'll sneak in a slow trill for a few months
 before I decide on a direction
because
 I'm in no hurry to
 modulate

A day,
today really
now
late fall
breezy, sunny, dazzling

with the last brittle leaves
dancing a happy dance
of privileged and unexpected
longevity

On a day like this

my grandmother
would be quietly bleaching
tea cups
a subtle gesture of welcome to
inevitable snows

Her mother might
have made a fragrant batch of
buttery shortbread
Her daughter might have peacefully
pruned away summer

And while her great-granddaughters learn this day

to spell 'school,'
to conjugate swimming in Spanish
and grasp molar volume of gasses at *STP*,

one of her granddaughters
interrupts her
power viola practicing of
an-entire-opera-in-one-morning
to write a poem
about
bleach

Dear Grammy,

I know you're dead & all that,
but I thought I'd check in
with you anyway,
as there's so much
to tell you these days

About this summer's corn
almost as sweet as the ears
we'd relay race from the garden
to your expectant hands
into the waiting pot

About the Heavenly Blues . . .
Burpee® stills sells the seeds
morning glory that seems to
last well past noon,
my first memory that stuck,
besides your exotic voice,
about life in America

About the china
and the silver—
they're all fine
well-used
well-loved

Were you? I wonder
Well-loved? Farmer's wife, et cetera

I hope you were
I know you had that
passive-aggressive thing going
those last few decades
but I sure loved ya,

sitting on your soft lap
cross-stitching my gingham apron
under your light-hearted tutelage
Your everfull canister of candy peas
laughing verdantly in the Bisquick wilderness
of your '60's farm kitchen
Your endless patience with the banging out of
infinite arhythmic variations
of Heart and Soul
Your powerful sense of feng shui
half a century before it had a name in America

And who could forget
biting into that
divine warmth of your
shortbread
mainlined in
from your rich Scottish blood

a few cells of which
still joyride around
inside me as I spot a
thistle,
see Macbeth,
feel that ancient shudder rip through me
as a bagpipe begins to find its drone . . .

Every day you seem to still whisper yourself into my day,
with the rolling pin, a bowl or two, a fragrance

Anyway, miss ya!
Hope you're well
and thanks again for the Wedgewood

love

k

Shame

Before I was able to
interpret the scenery
through numbered texts
corresponding to
numbered signs
along the drive,
I came upon them at
Stop #12

Pines,
with a presence
too easily defined as
regal,
as quietly, grandly
operatic

A feeling of reigning There
and Belonging and
Owning the Space,
the Moment

and then I read. . . .

“Yet, for all their benefits,
pine plantations are out of place in
Sleeping Bear Dune National Lakeshore . . .
native forest growth is
more desirable here than
pine plantations.

In some parts of the park,
portions of pine plantations
have been cut selectively to
encourage a mingling of
natural forest growth
among the pine trees.”

I suddenly felt obliged,
as an invasive Australian species,
to fly out of the car
and mingle amiably and
apologetically with
the less
desirable

Poetry

Subscript

Translated from the perceived
Catalan as she lingered
over a tapas,

and from the Swedish
as she dreamed a
hefty sandy blonde
into her bed

And translated from the Czech
as she fingered garnets
to Dvorak's auslander rhythms

and from the Hungarian
as she remembered the
husky voice of the waitress
seducing the entire table
with her menu *recitative*

And translated from the Greek
as she remembered a particular
baklava born into honey

and from the heart,
as she thought of . . .

(Translator Needed. Inquire Within)

Periodically . . .

It was today,
after I spied on an old periodic table
of the Elements,
the subscript

‘Elements 110–111 are not included
in this periodic table,
because their existence
is
still being disputed
among scientists’

That I,
in a current state of obliqueness,
dreamed of,
ached for
such attention

Element 110.21

A row of pipe-smoking
lab coats pondering
my very

As I whistle a
sweet little ditty and
wink at their horn-rimmed
appraisal

Distinguished Bones

Breezing by
the cemetery
with windows open
I became aware of
the rattling of bones
as we floated past

And wondered how *many* bones
lay at rest there . . .
206 times the number of gravestones
I suppose,
plus or minus a few
amputations and
natural augmentations or shortages

Did any former pianist
lie among the distinguished
 plumber
 teacher
 hausfrau
 judge

And if so,
were metakarpals
getting itchy

or simply in a state of eternal
relief that
some other hand now
plays
Rachmaninoff?

III

Modulation to Relative Minor

Same key signature, three notes down,
and the world suddenly seems a lot darker . . .

*Preferring the b.
Encountering the –*

Most of them were lucky enough,
the owners of a hyphen,
now simply bones
in this peaceful shady green

Even young George
and Rosemary
had at least a decade of it

but little Mary Kay,
of August 14–August 15, 1950,
could hardly claim one

No lullaby sung
on her one day filled with sobs
and the roaring silence
of
disbelief
that I still could hear
hovering over
her tiny
stone

With a comforting
snap of the purse,
I contained the grownup
until I reached the car

Opening the door
with the importance of
errand completion

Closing
Slamming away maturity
and recalling
the snappy click
of my Mary Janes
they one month new
me four years old
The black shiny shoes,
with a snappy buckle
keeping my wild toes
in a tidy package
And, in the Mary Janes,
I sang 'Mary had a Little Lamb'
into a tape recorder
in the Tape Recorder store in the
middle of hot limp New Dehli
my audience,
a musically discerning father,
the shopkeeper
and the woman in the doorway
begging in ragged sari,
toes unfettered, dust delicate
on powdered soles

I looked down at Mary Jane
and up at hunger,
finished my song
My reedy Australian voice
played back,
mocking, it seemed,
my varied audience

And I felt ashamed at four
of having any things
shiny and black
which were not
eyes

from Iowa Poems

I

As rapturous chords from
 Grieg piano concerto
 blew our souls along the bumpy
 Iowa road,
A monarch butterfly,
 once an aerial dancer
 of a different beat
 beneath its Mexican
migration,

 found
sudden silence

in our dusty grill

Green
Red

In the green of
the land,
blazing,

He slaughtered the
lamb
in front of us,
lambs ourselves,

knife to neck,
bucket below to
catch the life
the death
the blood

And as I watched
I screamed life
silently into my
five-year-old head

frantically stirring up visions

of
Big Reds
booming over the blood bucket
across the
baked orange Outback
carrying away death in
their roo pockets

of
kookaburras
singing their dusty song
of laughter,
their eerie cachinnation

of
koalas sleeping
in the impossibly soft olive embrace
of a gum tree

silent as life
silent as knife

I watched her,
my eldest daughter,
the one with wings,
turn into a cardinal,
male,
a scarlet wail in my dream,
saw the nightmare shadow
of a hawk swoop

my silent wordless screams
to no avail
with feet bound
to the ground

They came down
I began to imagine
brutally beating the hawk
but stopped because
she spoke, measured,
“Don’t, Momma.”

“Are you happy?”
I asked inanely
to the breathing chests
rising in Harmony

“Yes,” she said calmly
through her beak
and closed her sharp eyes

I awake in a
horror of colour,
my breathing and heart rushing,
rushing any tempo
I had
ever
known

W e've all known
the feet-in-cement feeling
inside our nightmares

the chase of horror
with no
allowed
movement

the legs-with-no-synapses
the naked-in-a-crowd-
of-attired

but I ask you now . . .

How are you doing in
that dreamless world you
inhabit
at the moment,

with sun and bird song beating
against your
unyielding walls

as you study
the
density
of
despair

?

T
oday
in the Season of Yellow
with a Suggestion of Orange to come
I hung out the wash
—a Reds load

and each clothespin whispered
a memory

the pink of tutu love
the purple of sunset dazzle
the orange of that
rose
in which a suggestion of you
floated between
an unfathomable coral
and a blush of pink

But the reds bellowed remembrance
Stains—
from the moment I thought
womanhood had arrived
. . . a crushed cherry
on the wagon seat ride
back from picking

from the blackened howling crimson
of a miscarriage
from other warmer scarlet memories
too deep to reveal

but now,
under the downcast overcast,
all I see
all I hear
is a bloody requiem
crashing against the shores
of my veins within,
pounding life relentlessly
into an
emptied
heart

Saving Heart

These days
 it seems
 I need to
 take out my heart
 at the end of each day

hold it gently in my hands,
 lovingly demanding eye contact
as I tell it softly how much a life it gives

bathe it in warm rosewater
 whisper a non-love poem
 about geese
 dusk
 tree

massage it as if a downy dove lay within
 infuse it with essence of lavender
 of rose from a garden of my memory,
 always available for
 trriage bouquets,
sing it a slightly shattered song of sustenance
 and of course a lullaby
 of the most noble
 metre

and, as I,
 filled with hope,
 slip it back in,
 surreptitiously implore it
 to keep considering
that beating thing it does . . .

Me, Only Alone

I must have been
the only one
to hear
those howls
in hallowed halls

He bellowed,
roars of ravaged loneliness
of inexplicable separation

which is why,
I believe,
I was the
only one

standing
shaking
before the
Easter Island specimen
inside
the
British Museum

IV

Standard Rep

The core of life's performances; where we are in society's honeycomb
of expectations, what songs we let ourselves sing . . .

In the Hall

outside the classroom door
three of us stood
obeying parental
insistence
that no
school prayer
land on our tender souls

And we awkwardly
worshipped the floor,
ostracized by the blurred
chanting
beating against
a door of exclusion

secretly wishing we
could catch a glimpse
of that curious kingdom
we saw in the puzzled
eyes of our
sweet
teacher

What Is America?

When I was five
it was the tightly-wrapped Velveeta
standing aloof beside
the more scantily-clad Australian cheeses
on the grocer's shelf

and a faint memory
of an astonishing blue
of morning glory
up a well
on a farm
by a corn jungle
and grandparents with
gentle voices
filled with shiny new words

When I was almost eight
I passed through again
Now it was the Golden Country
sailing into America under a bridge
near the Golden Gate
Big bold Golden People with
hair the colour of those
sands defining
the ribs of America

When I was ten
I looked down over the border
from the tidy row of provinces
toward the America
which would be home in July
I saw now
a strong America,
its poetic astronauts
with funny hair matching their lawns

its flower children
battling war
with peace

and its farmers
so unlike the gentlemen
I had come to recognize
by the Outback in their squint
Becoming an American
(my passport sang its little song)
I now couldn't
close my eyes
and they began to sting
with wonder at the land
with discomfort at
the people's discontent,
struggles so clearly boxed
in my former lands (three),
here
so vague and bubbling

I rubbed my eyes
and began to breathe
the air of my
new country
and listened
as the rhythm
of America
closed in on
my
heartbeat

As I
rail sail
through the
great British green
after all these centuries,
I spot History
crouched in misty sodden fields
the secrets green,
the battle screams,
the hunched gypsies
still living
the outskirts life
after all these centuries

and I,
half-filled with crisp British
and harmonic minor gypsy blood
after all these centuries,
shudder as I suddenly feel
a startling chill
of the Past
begin to
burn within

Around the Globe

As Queen Isabel, my daughter,
boldly monologues her way
through the morning
in a distant part of London,

as I think about that
other budding actress,
Goneril speech selected,
trash-talking her way
through a row of
nervous King Lears,
she, already in character
as their eternally vicious daughter,

while my daughter
worries about her king's
crumbling of power
and
getting into the Program,

I decide to ramble
three minutes now to the Globe
if I walk at the pace of
the frozen figure on the sign
along a path
cobbled with pigeon poo and
suddenly

here.
Bard.

My head now
tight with Word

I spot a Starbuck's right
across the street
and pop in to write this,
not a sonnet, not a madrigal
and sip as I
stare through the
glass at St. Paul's

and breathe through an
overwhelming
sense of
now

*Stoplight Number 4,
75th time*

You've known all along
it's a journey, this life thing

You drive the drive
walk the walk,
moving lightly with a heavy foot
against the death thing,
heavily with a light foot
along the other path

But this morning at the stoplight
you realized today the path
mocked you
You hear the same offkey recording
of a third-rate composer
you heard yesterday
and the same talking head
tells you again of the young warrior
who perished in the battle
you heard of last week

It's a circle today
and driving around the perimeter
of your life, you peer,
as you steer, with caution,
into the concentric circles of other lives,
yours, yours'

Rain arrives at stoplight number 5
and brings drunken windshield diamonds
dancing briefly under the dominion of
the wipers
and you turn off the
radio as you did
yesterday at
stoplight number 5
and begin to hear
your heartbeat
joining the raindrops
And watch your fiery tears blending
with the red diamonds
and when they unexpectedly
turn green
you spot a trajectory
off the circumference
and veer
recklessly towards
a new path,
leaving circle and mockery behind

I wonder . . .

Did you see me
in the rearview mirror
blowing gently
with all my might,
trying to alter your geometry?

Just a glimpse of
a suggestion of
willow
in fleeting foreground
pulled me with strong loving arms
out of turnpike

and into an exuberant
melody of
a grandmother's laugh,
indolent innertube floats on
equally lazy currents,

and the sudden impossibility
of a great sadness

Time Zone, Mine

It is,
As it was
Always . . .

with, within,
the waves

with, within,
the mid-morning
imperceptibly modest
path of the sun
ticking along its
solemn, noble,
blinding trajectory

with, within,
the cardinal's tidy septulets
timing territorial claims,
and the scolding chipmunk's
tolling of warnings and discontent

and while we're thinking about birds,
always within
the crow's blackened
dark recitative

All
orbiting
with, within,
your heavy
ethereal
breaths
as you sleep
next to me
as I lean
imperceptibly
into your shoulder
into your life

(to a stranger on a plane)

I owned it,
I know it was only a moment
but I have papers to prove it

Well,
this paper

Standing in a column of the late afternoon blaze
breathing in torrid heat from
another time
another density

as the crisp hazy palms waited
in hushed anticipation
for my response,
mine quieter
than theirs

as I drew it deep into me
the heat
the moment

and tossed the pearl,
slo-mo,
into that untidy
treasure chest
I hide in
the back
of my untidy
head



Australian-born Katrin Talbot has been fortunate to find many opportunities to combine her love for music and word. She is a violist and has written poetry since she was six, spending time under an almond tree in Australia, pounding away on an Olivetti. She has a B.A. from Reed College and an M.S. from UW–Madison. Her poetry has appeared in *The New Plains Review*, *Fresh Ink*, *Free Verse*, *Bravado*, *Your Daily Poem*, *Zoland*, *Inertia*, *Ginosko*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *If*, *Manorborn*, *Eating her Wedding Dress* (Ragged Sky Press), *Empty Shoes* (Popcorn Press), *And Again Last Night* (Indigo Dreams), *An Anthology of Contemporary Love Poems* (Blue Fog Journal), *Not A Muse* (Haven Books), *Chopin with Cherries* (Moonrise Press), *Wisconsin Poet's Calendars*, and in the upcoming anthologies: *Collecting Life*, *Vicious Verses and Reanimated Rhyme*, *The Bridges of New York*, *Tribute to Orpheus II*, and *The Poetry of Travel*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2009.

Music has always been a sustaining part of her life, and she's had the privilege of playing music with fabulous colleagues, including the Pro Arte Quartet, The Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society, the Red Hot Lava Chamber Music Festival, the Boulder Bach Festival, the Oakwood Chamber Players, the American Sinfonietta, the Madison Symphony Orchestra, and the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra. Her dirty little secret is a stint as a rhythm guitarist and violinist in a science-nerd rock band in her college days.

Talbot is also a photographer. Her book *Schubert's Winterreise: A Winter Journey in Poetry, Image, and Song* (UW Press, 2003), won a Best of the Best from University Presses, from the American Library Association. Her portrait work has appeared in the *New York Times*, and has been used by the Metropolitan Opera, the Santa Fe Opera, the Boston Symphony, the San Francisco Opera, and many other music organizations. She currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

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