

Lisa Bielawa

WWW.LISABIELAWA.NET

Note

Premiere: May 10, 2003, Carla Kihlstedt, voice & violin; Polestar Gallery, Seattle
Duration: 25'
Instrumentation: Solo violin and voice

I was in Prague for the first time for just one day in October, and I walked all day, reeling, overwhelmed by its beauty and richness. In a small bookshop I stumbled across an edition of Franz Kafka's *Meditation* (1912) in a beautiful translation by Siegfried Morkowitz. *This Time* is itself a meditation on a very short excerpt from this volume: "And this time I only recognized these old games after being with them for such a long time. I rubbed my fingertips against each other to erase the shame."

I marveled that this writing was private, quietly observant, and so unlike the allegorical, dystopic Kafka I knew. This introspective side of Kafka seemed to beg for a solo performer who could create a whole world, alone. I wanted to write a series of pieces expressly for Carla Kihlstedt, who was looking to build a repertoire for herself as a solo violinist/vocalist.

Initially, I wrote *This Time* as a stand-alone piece, for the 2001 MATA Festival in New York. Then I discovered the *Parables* on the bookshelf at Aaron Copland's home, while in residence as a Copland Fellow. Again, I recognized Kafka the miniaturist. The thrill of this discovery and a growing intimacy with Carla Kihlstedt's inimitable technique urged me to write *A Handful of World* and *Couriers*. The remaining four pieces, all settings from *Meditation*, were written over the course of a year. They feel to me like journal entries, reflecting moments in both my own life and Carla's, as we have worked together over time. – Lisa Bielawa

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Text

This Time

And this time I only recognized these old games after being with them for such a long time. I rubbed my fingertips against each other to erase the shame.

Couriers

They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other - since there are no kings - messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service.

A Handful of World

Abraham falls victim to the following illusion: he cannot stand the uniformity of this world. Now the world is known, however, to be uncommonly various, which can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely. Thus this complaint at the uniformity of the world is really a complaint at not having been mixed profoundly enough with the diversity of the world.

Ghosts

You've obviously never talked to ghosts. You can never get a straight answer from them. It's an endless discussion. These ghosts seem to doubt their existence more than we do, and no wonder, considering how frail they are.

Lost

...I stood up, of course, and sighed. 'No, why are you sighing like that? What's happened? Is it some catastrophe that can never be undone? Will we never be able to recover from it? Is everything really lost?' Nothing was lost."

We Ran

We ran closer together, some held hands, you couldn't hold your head high enough because we were going downhill. One shouted an Indian war cry, our legs galloped as never before, when we jumped the wind picked us up by the hips. Nothing could have stopped us; we were running so fast that even when overtaking someone, we could fold our arms and calmly look around.

Finally

Finally, rain even begins to fall from the now overcast sky.

Sources:

Franz Kafka, Meditation, tr. Siegfried Morkowitz ©1998 Vitalis, Prag.
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Franz Kafka, Parables, tr. Willa & Edwin Muir ©1947 Schocken Books

LAMENTATIONS FOR A CITY

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: November 14, 2004, Cerddorian Vocal Ensemble, conducted by Kristina Boerger
Duration: 14'
Inst: Mixed chorus (20+ voices) with soloists; English horn

The poet of the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* was witness to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. His descriptions of the details of suffering are painfully vivid, and his passionate eulogy to the wounded city takes its literary place alongside Euripides's heartbreaking verses to the fallen Troy or W.G. Sebald's searching inquiries into the rubble of Dresden.

When I wrote these *Lamentations* I was on retreat in Umbria, a valley of walled cities with ghosts at every gate. The now-serene and quaint countryside has a deep history of brutality. When we see Renaissance paintings of cities, they appear abstracted to us, little units cradled, perhaps, in a saint's hand. But in Umbria these pictures seemed not so far from the truth. There I saw cities as they had been for millennia, until relatively recently: jewels on hilltops, elegantly poised for self-defense but mercilessly vulnerable when penetrated.

Troy, Jerusalem, Perugia, Dresden, Hiroshima, New York, Baghdad, Beslan, Jerusalem again. Sometimes great poets witness the raping of great cities. But in September 2004 I turned instead to the hemorrhaging web media for crisis reports from cities all over the world. This language appears as background texture in *Lamentations for a City* to give testimony to the vitality of the human tradition of bringing cities to their knees through cruelty, treason, humiliation and destruction. – Lisa Bielawa

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Text

A reading from the Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet:

ALEPH (1:1)

How lonely sits the city
That was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
She that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the cities
Has become a vassal.

BETH (1:2)

She weeps bitterly in the night,
Tears on her cheeks;
Among all her lovers
She has none to comfort her;
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her.
They have become her enemies.

DALETH (1:4)

The roads to Zion mourn,
For none come to the appointed feasts;
All her gates are desolate,
Her priests groan;
Her maidens have been dragged away,
And she herself suffers bitterly.

ZAYIN (1:7)

Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction
and bitterness
All the precious things that were hers from days of old...

ALEPH (4:1)

How the gold has grown dim,
How the pure gold is changed!
The holy stones lie scattered
At the head of every street.

YOD (2:10)

The elders of the daughter of Zion
Sit on the ground in silence;
They have cast dust on their heads
And put on sackcloth;
The maidens of Jerusalem
Have bowed their heads to the ground.

KAPH (2:1)

My eyes are spent with weeping;
My soul is in tumult;
My heart is poured out in grief

Additional Texts: Paraphrased from web news sources around the world

(ALEPH)

no information about his condition is available
he said such meetings are commonplace
then they sent a tape that was supposed to contain their demands
even in cases where the cause was known, records sometimes don't specify
they offer moral support but no military training

he also urged national restraint
he urged them to show love and respect for foreigners
as the initial investigation showed
both buses departed from the central bus station in the city
they were also aboard the plane
higher authorities were aware of abuses

(BETH)

they observed a minute's silence
refusing to cooperate for fear of their lives
refusing for years to cooperate
have been there for months without being charged

they can be held indefinitely
they were aware of abuses
they take all necessary measures
they observed a minute's silence

(DALETH)

fighting broke out around 5
for sure there will be retaliation
found in the car
further to the South

He said such meetings are commonplace
He vowed to take revenge for Thursday's killings
He announced instead that he was firing all his ministers
He tried to return but was not allowed in

He hasn't spoken since
He visited the center
He urged them to show love and respect
Hundreds of armed fighters

(ZAYIN)

relations between the two countries are so close
they routinely share classified information
they can be held indefinitely if considered a security threat
a danger looms that he could be held responsible

heightened regional tensions
raising the specter of a raid

Because of the destruction of the daughter
of my people.

MEM (2:13)

What can I say to you, to what compare you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?
What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin;
Who can restore you?

before the woman reported him
the harsh criticism he received

(YOD)

these comments are a basis for mutiny
security forces will conduct multiple arrests
sending a huge column of smoke up into the air
a soldier must fulfill orders

security forces
sending smoke
sirens went off
soldiers escaping

(after 'my heart is poured out in grief')
because of the destruction
the soldiers felt their lives were at risk
no crime goes unpunished
I don't know why this happened to us
you traitor, stop pretending and wait
the destruction of the daughter of my people
leave them out of this ugly game
sending a huge column of smoke into the air
the retaliation will be justified
hundreds of armed fighters are ready
for sure there will be retaliation
a soldier must fulfill orders
explosives were found in the car
I don't want to describe what I saw
refusing for years to cooperate
witnesses refusing for fear of their lives
they are ready for future attacks

I don't know why this happened
I don't want to describe what I saw

A COLLECTIVE CLEANSING

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: September 2000, The Kitchen, NYC with the composer performing
Duration: 15'
Instrumentation: Solo voice and digital audio

Selected choral excerpts from the Aeschylus tragedy *The Suppliant Maidens* are the setting for Ms. Bielawa's multi-tracked, vocal soundtrack electronically composed in both Greek and English. She explores the personalities of the 50 Danaids, the daughters of the Greek king Danaos, in their individual and collective roles, her voice both communally interacting while sometimes coexisting in separate expressive layers. A broad range of emotional textures emerges, all of them organic to the sound of her voice and the language of the play. The tension between the digital sound technology and the unique natural instrument of the human voice provides grounds for exploration of the key issues in *A Collective Cleansing*; the exponential, seductive expansion of industry and technology, and its continued effects upon our sustaining environment. – Cynthia Cox

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in the earth, on the heights, in this air.	(lines 679-680)
On earth a godhost gives order to nature Which god shall I cry to?	(lines 790-792)
The Father Urge of my green life	(lines 794-795)
Never may they know the peace that scorched earth brings	(lines 865-866)
Flower of youth bud unstemmed	(line 894)
must not mow down the finest blooms	(line 897)
Truth stops my breath ...what was the earthly use?	(line 980)
...born to treachery and crammed with unclean hungers...	(lines 995-996)
io io ioioioioio O Earth O healing hills	(lines 1027-1029)
Must I be forced against heart's dream into a murderous bed?	(lines 1082-1063)
Dream! Black dream!	(line 1076)
I left my reverence beside the Nile.	(line 1220)
...heart's guide.	(line 1281)
Be trustful, Father.	(line 1342)
Sing praise to rivers that rise...	(line 1357)
...sun-oiled streams ...pleasurous waters to sweeten the dust of the mother Earth and fulfill her with life upon life	(lines 1359-1362)
And in her motherlight soft daughters walk,	(line 1375)