

Outside my midnight house

Program notes

This song cycle was commissioned by Scott Piper in memory of the late Jim Thomas, a beloved Missouri poet. Jim's poetry is characterized by its "Midwestern" flavor, its wonderful use of imagery and humor, and its wise, subtle insights into life and the world around us.

"I would kiss you with these words" is a love song that ends with a very sad twist.

"Catnap" is a cabaret-style song which finds the poet increasingly absorbed by his cat's behavior.

"Scotch and Snow" is introspective, as the poet gazes out his window, sips a beverage and contemplates inspiration.

The musical style of "The Dinner Bell" is reminiscent of an old-timey television commercial. Here, the poet puts his spin on "chicken of the sea" and ultimately exercises admirable(!) self-control.

The performers on this recording are tenor Scott Piper and pianist Nancy Hueber.

Texts for *Outside my midnight house*

- *Jim Thomas*

1. *I would kiss you with these words*

I would kiss
you with these words
and do, as you form them
in your mind:
the trees
are black with fog,
drops of light bombing beneath
them; in front of me
puffed-out sparrows scatter
like chaff as we walk,
our breath joining the fog;
I go up the stairs
look in dark panes
of door, and see
I'm alone.

2. *Catnap*

She began a sigh
and then it got away from her
and turned into the high
tautening luxury of a yawn. A purr
escaped her parted lips;
the tremor spread as she stretched
and all the way, past shoulders, hips,
she thrust and hollowed, arched
and fell like a tent
enlivened by the wind testing the guys,
all those silken surfaces sliding went
back and forth. She'd closed her eyes
then opened them, as if her thoughts were straying
back. I'd forgotten what I had been saying.

3. Scotch and Snow

Outside my midnight house a slow wind
swirls heavy snow beneath my light. On impulse
I pack a tall glass full, trickle scotch and melt
the white to straw yellow, sip it as I work.
I'm revising, trying to make these words—
typically dry and ordinary—come
alive, seem fresh enough to dance, at least
move a little. Ah, a nice hint of peat
not masked by fresh snow melt. I think of ice
in the poem I'm working on, how it looked
like flowers, hints of finely veined jade
current-nibbled, and sip my drink, retype.
It's a different spirit, this, but I seek
me, inebriate of daily plainness.

4. The Dinner Bell

Basted chickens broiling
in the sun, almost done,
turning delicately, deliciously
brown, spicy, skinned—
I pass, look at them,
hunger juices up in me:
the bells I want to answer
alarming systems,
jungle in my pulse—
the urge is built-in
and lemmings the blood
to pour into the sea
and soar to depth and shore.
O chicken of the sea and sun
O banquet, steaming, nearly done.

*These texts have been used with the kind permission
of Rita Thomas (November 26, 2012)*