

Early Harvests

Program Note

Early Harvests was inspired by the recollections of a Hungarian Jew whose family was among the final victims of the Holocaust. Above all, it focuses on her relationship to her sister Klara, who, with the rest of her relatives, perished in the camps.

The first movement – “The Taking” – depicts the young girl’s abduction. Like some fast cuts in a film, objects from her everyday life flash before her eyes. She reaches out to her mother and father for help, and cries out to her sister to ask, “Where are your hands?”

The second movement is a conversation between the survivor – now a mature woman – and her sister, who remains a child, frozen in time. She recalls their life together in the camps, and happy pre-war memories with their father. She retells their incomprehensible story in terms of a fairy tale, and, finally, returns to the concentration camp itself to help liberate her sister’s spirit.

To mark her visit to her sister, she searches for a stone among the rubble of the camp; she lights a candle in her memory, and sends her spirit on its journey home.

Early Harvests was commissioned by Music in the Mountains and premiered in 2000 by Kerry Walsh, soprano, and Paul Perry, conducting the Music in the Mountains Festival Orchestra.

Early Harvests - texts by Francesca Hersh

I - The Taking

Klara
Bed
Floor
Blood
Wall
Stain
Screen
Moth
Roof
Plate
Fork
Chair
Cloth
Door
Porch
Path
Road

Train tracks
bodies crushed
nightfall
nightmare
fever dream:
legs tied in sheets
arms fling darkness.
Bring me cool hands,
damp rags
sweet voices,
come sing the dream away.

Train turn back
clock stop
dark time
unravel.
Rip the seams
wind the wool
give me your hands.

Ripped
Taken
Boots
Bags
Lamp
Doll
Dress

Hair
Socks
Pen
Scarf
Gloves
Klara
Your hands

Hold breath
close eyes
clench fists
sing myself away
sing fright away.
No song for this
no breath.

Mama!
Where are your legs?
tuck me behind them,
behind the cloth
of your skirt.
I reach, reach
for you now.

Night.
I hear witches, Papa.
There are witches coming.
Heart stop beating.
They'll hear you.
Legs stop trembling.
They'll see you.
Call out quiet--Papa!
Hear me, hear me,
come to me.

The moon is breaking
the air is screaming
the rain is burning
the earth is splitting.
Klara,
where are your hands
your hands
your hands?

II - A Stone in My Heart

Klara
even in the camps
there were stars.
god played a film
of summer nights
as we lay on our backs to dream.

I dream you now, Klara
awake in the stars
your hair grown back
translucent flesh
on shining bones.
I reach for you
but gravity still owns me.

Remember August
walking by the lake?
We gathered smooth stones,
Father said "stars fallen to earth
for you, Dear Ones." Stones
are dark stars for grief.

Death markers
calling cards for graves
you have no grave
I carry your stone
in my heart.

Fairy tale magic:
barbed wire grew
as thorns encircled
briar rose. The spell said:
the sisters must meet at the fence
each dawn. On the hundredth day
the spell broke wrong.

I am back to find a stone
for you. They are spilled
over troubled earth,
blood markers:
here the bunk we shared,
there the corner of an oven.
Klara, don't watch me cry. Look,
I light a candle for you.

Let go my hand.
I give you to the seven sisters of the sky.
Go now. Let them rock you. They
are your boat
your river
your journey home.
Look. here is your grave,
here are stones from my heart.
Don't sleep here
follow the river
find your way home.