frank j. oteri

the nurturing river

14 sonnets of james r. murphy for wide-ranged male voice and piano

Transformal Music (ASCAP)

frank j. oteri / james r. murphy

the nurturing river

introduction

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About the nurturing river

Though now 30 years old, *the nurturing river*, a song-cycle based on 14 sonnets by James R. Murphy for high male voice and piano composed between 1981 and 1982, is very much like the music that I still write. It is the earliest of the 10 cycles I have composed thus far which takes the words of a single poet and transforms them through music structured to mirror the meanings of the poems and cadenced to match the rhythmic inflections of the spoken English of the texts. But it is the only one of these works in which I actually worked closely with the poet. Murphy was originally a high school teacher of mine and has served as a mentor to me throughout my life. The "nurturing" of this process of collaboration gave me the confidence to subsequently embark on indirect collaboration with poets from other places and times such as Richard Brautigan, E. E. Cummings, Margaret Atwood, William Butler Yeats, Kenneth Patchen, Dylan Thomas, and—most recently—Stephen Crane.

But *the nurturing river* has had a somewhat unusual history. I began composing the music, with no particular singer, pianist or performance in mind, jotting down various mnemonic ciphers (rather than completely worked out musical notation) during my senior year at the High School of Music and Art (subsequently consolidated into the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and the Arts). I completed a fully notated musical score during my freshman year in college, at Columbia University, while studying composition with Max Lifchitz who was extremely supportive despite warning me of its impracticalities. But it remained unperformed for decades. From time to time I would show my handwritten manuscript to singers in the hopes of engendering a performance, but invariably would be told that the vocal range I wanted was humanly impossible. So after a while I stopped actively advocating for it, chalking up the fate of *the nurturing river* to its being a by-product of the idealistic and unrealistic musings of youth.

However, in 2009, my wife, keyboardist Trudy Chan, began collaborating with an extraordinary singer named Phillip Cheah who performs as both a baritone and male soprano, effortlessly maneuvering between the two ranges. Hearing him rekindled my interest in the nurturing river and when I spoke about the piece to him he was intrigued. But when I looked around for the manuscript of the score I could not find it. James Murphy unearthed among his papers a tattered 8 ¹/₂"x14" photocopy I made for him back in the early 1980s, but since the original was written on 9"x12" paper, some pages were cut off (my music frequently spilled over the margins); worse still, other pages were missing entirely. I nevertheless began re-engraving it on my computer hoping that by refamilarizing myself with this music I would be able to reconstruct the passages that were now gone. Then, before it had to come to that, I discovered, much to my surprise and delight, that I had deposited a copy of the nurturing river in the American Music Center score library which had since become a part of the American Music Collection at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Thanks to George Boziwick, Chief of the NYPL's Music Division, and Jonathan Hiam, the Curator of the American Music Collection, I was able to obtain everything that had been lost and therefore was able to complete the digitally-engraved score exclusively from what I had originally written.

Apart from some very minor alterations, most of which were fixing clear mistakes in the score (e.g. missing rests, accidentals, incomplete dynamic markings, etc.), everything is how I had originally conceived it back when I was 17 years old. Admittedly there are a few things that I'd probably be less inclined to compose now, but I still stand by it. And eventually this music has finally found its ideal performers. Phillip can easily navigate the extremes of these vocal lines and actually make them sound not only perfectly natural but beautiful. (Several listeners who have heard him perform these songs initially assumed they were actually written for him.) Plus Phillip and Trudy's ongoing musical partnership has allowed them to fully internalize the various chance elements and extended techniques scattered throughout the score and bring to them exciting interpretive nuances. The three final songs of the cycle were first performed, by Phillip and Trudy, at the Church of St. Luke in the Fields as part of a program of American art songs called "American Dim-Sum" on July 3, 2010. They performed these three songs again as well as the first, second, and fourth songs as part of Symphony Space's 2011 Music Now marathon at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Symphony Space on February 21, 2011. (An audio recording of that performance is available for streaming at www.symphonyspace.org/live/musicnow2011.) And now Phillip and Trudy have worked through all of the 14 songs and will give the first complete performance of *the nurturing river* at the Tenri Cultural Institute as part of a program that will exclusively feature my music on February 23, 2013.

Aside from being my earliest song cycle, *the nurturing river* is also the earliest piece of music I composed which I feel represents my own compositional voice. It is my first in-depth exploration of a new type of modular tonality that is informed as much by the motivic development of minimalism as it is by the procedural concepts of serialism and the unpredictable serendipity of indeterminacy. Basically, the vocal melodies for the 14 songs of *the nurturing* river are all variations of the same basic phrase. Each piano accompaniment is constructed from a single interval which changes for each song, initially expanding to larger intervals and then contracting back to smaller ones. (E.g. the harmonies of the first song are all derived from the interval of a second [both major and minor]; the second song uses only major thirds; the eighth song uses thirteenths; the final song uses only minor thirds; etc.) For contrast, these intervals are treated in a variety of ways: vertically as chords, horizontally as countermelodies, as tremolos, etc. Each song ends with a hint of the interval contained in the following song with the last song ending with hints of the very beginning, making a full circle. This structure seemed an appropriate musical device to convey the structural manipulations of James R. Murphy's 14 sonnets, each of which is a Petrarchan sonnet divided into two quartets and two terzets, and each of which has the identical acrostic "To Maxine Deseta" with the "x" of Maxine represented by the word "cross." Though this may all appear to be highly formal both verbally and musically, the poems often break the traditional iambic pentameter of classical sonnets in favor of modern American prosody. The rhythmic irregularities of the poems are reflected in metrical devices in the music which contains a great deal of indeterminate rhythms so that ideally no two performances would ever be identical.

-Frank J. Oteri (October 18, 2012)

the 14 murphy sonnets

1

the nurturing river runs in sweetness of water's downward plunge, in a soughing midnight wind of lulling call, in the lap around the shallows behind around the bend.

crossing when it's flooding tears apart the soul, inundating thrust in swirling thorough hold. needing when it's trickling satisfies the mind, erasing disappointment in its filling find.

don't jump in the water pulling close apart, ease into the current flowing past the sight seeking like as like in steadiness of will.

end the searching movement in constancy of thrill tossing precious fluid sparkling in the night, arching in the aching spending of the heart.

2

the soothing slip to sleep in nestling arms our expected end to reach for all new days. motion stills so the mind can skip away and the ways we are meander dreaming's storms.

crisscrossing fears protect our inner screens. inwardly moving, cutting shadows show needs to be explored in learning how to know each edge as vanished sight of soundless scene.

doubts are projected onto a bursting shell, events unroll in waves of sense's seas salvaged by their buoyance of crazed unreal.

expansive holding unravels knotted hell, thoughts of love evolve in changing keys as doors unlock in showing how i feel.

3

towns grate around my bed their civil noise, offer vibrant stench in some peddler's fall, mask a lover's thought in concrete of city hall, ask a calm acceptance in a doorman's poise.

crossing below my seeing is fitful stopping flow, in inundating web of forces known, next my very window this all is show, endless other windows searching for a key.

driving manic action, dust and roar and doom, endless other windows light with humming tune seeking for the motion a sailor walks alone.

endless are the changes the waves a deck will see, timeless in their balance of rhythmic changing moon, and endless folding difference cordoned off as rooms.

4

twice again the sun returns as fresh orange wall beyond a slivery window's pain. masks the crude brick in a pulsing fire of flesh a dancing ephemera of dawn refrain.

crossing in mind to room's controlling depth, i note the somber pause in slow cloud's dance; note again how briefly fullness of feeling health entrances gaze on a sudden moment's chance.

down on the street below this quickened breath erratic sounds remind of bitter scene, shadows of the gritty gutter growing pale.

erratic thoughts all, grey images of death tearing through this brutal clarity i've seen alone above in soft ease of inward well. the echoes of their voices are low heard, our dead return to the mind's inner sight, march in solemn tribute one more time around the kitchen table after coffee.

crossing on my plate's parading ground in rough remembered line of lost years' flight, new patterns form in beat to now's salute entrancing me with tiny trampling feet.

desire for all beguiles this unique strangeness, extracts in show the then of this pen's strength, sends searching sounds to test this moment's fate.

each of us is heard a thousand moments, the thens of each our own repeating song attaching bone to feeling rush of home.

6

time again the clouds have burst, loosing fresh occasion; the rumbling gift splattered harsh morning with its slate grey thoughts, lives this night as misty lights—probing halos of blind sight.

crossing wipers show my way toward home, inward doubts fade beside these hissing wheels, nodding love holds to arm; the thrusting storm enmeshes swirling fears in moment's chills.

deep shivers wrack my balanced act, my care exhausts my seeming calm, the tears now come. senses reel as spray against the shell i guide.

everything is touched within cocoon i bear, the outward shield so artfully spun is numb; as long as massive flood conceals, i cry. the pools lie stagnant in my mind, each one only collecting water to evaporate, motion is denied except as disappearance, actionless thoughts fester without mention.

crossing from puddle to puddle, i grate inside, and lurk as lurching hulk, clearance needed for my bulk; i, bumbling for a pattern end in hip deep murky depths with no lantern.

dragging for bodies pulls up bilious moss, every sweetness of liquid roils in this mess, surety of growth stops in this feeling.

each connection for flowing damns in its choice, the vital sharing of knowing is lost in my chest, all cedar smells are trapped, foiled in their sealing.

8

the harbor is a hung silence of grey, only water calms to this balanced field; my directive purpose stalls, soul weightless as the summer settles in, sun concealed.

crossing sight's expanse, now fresh wholeness comes, in its sliding sense of time's demise. now again limits are just beyond limb's reach, each separate thinking stretching canvassed end.

drowning in color i'm lost in my mind, eating by seeing, i touch all of this time, seeking by telling, i make feel as i say;

earning in closely packed sense of each line this morning—though its message is only a day, an ordered sense of nothing, an otherness of rhyme. the oysters are too small and cling to rocks. our fetch is hard, and yet i labor on; my fulfilling is to earn this food so free and so to share with those who live around.

crossing through my mind's background--no clocks, indicating waves, concentrate of rippling on; now i need no more and end this playing sea, eking out my catch to hear a total sound.

design insures survival as my ketch blows east toward home, the tidal estuary seething, moving cauldron strewn with dead homes;

east toward sunrise, with water north and south, and tidal rhythm pulling, pushing—working at my back, my fronts: i'm lost with the bay.

10

this day's mildness belies it's november, our fevered storing haste is wrenched awry. morning slows til a summer's basking calm asks mindless leisured joy in nature's eye.

crossing fingers entwine our wishing's lives, inward doubts sluff in outward blissful clime, nearness presses all to the nearness smoothing palm, evening lengthens into warm seeing time.

dropped from the shoulders our habits are open, each liquid moment flesh of soothing ties stitched in quiet knowing to remember,

each solid thought of closeness packed to cart away tight to winter's quarters, when all will happen again, and once again, in shared retelling sighs. tidings come in unexpected waves of fear, overfill narrow depths of emotional fjords, mark a surge of living flood in line of tears; attack, and crest in rumbles of creaking boards.

crossings all ended in cul-de-sacs, angling intersections become pointed break, moving needed feelings come full, forcing, mangling, every future echoes in this damping proving.

details of message are lines of gritty facts etched by water's passing; in ebbing's flow scarred, fixed as final resting for this time.

each subtracting oneness is seen as regressive tax, the sin of knowing succeeds as a falling foe, and shows now in dis-ease, this telling rhyme.

12

the sun i see corrupts my sight: i'm blind. only color of the mind builds up whole form. my fantasies are all i have: i bind all inside, and hold to self with secret arms.

crossing this threshold faults the visional field, inflying vortices pinpoint their shifting souls nothing is cozy and feathered: nothing is real, eager nothing is attention to a particular role.

doubts disappear in remembered ease of ends, edges blur til haloed stage comes all, silence draws its curtain to yield an inner sight.

each other steadfastness can only pretend to become freeness centered, certain to fall, accepting the vanishing me of my fright.

11

the window is closed so wavy glass becomes one link to all that's left so far behind. my mind constructs a wind to blow about, around apartment's sense of space in blind

crossing to inner self, a protective shield in place, dropped before the eyes can see needles of thought rebounding on the walls, etched as shown framework; end in furnishing me.

despite green leaves, despite limb's dance enmeshed in true earth's change, the sense of real sits in this chair and orders all to be

enmeshed in time, cocooned in place, my sight turned back to see the gathered host of all i've been all astounds afresh with its patient waiting.

14

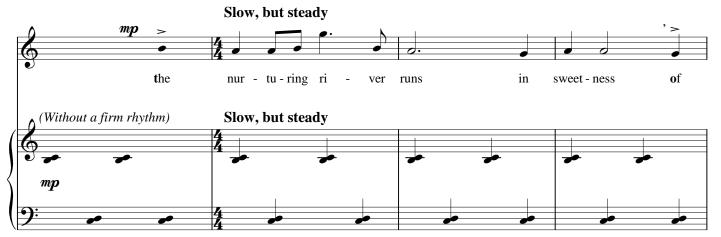
the boat it is which moves the car we ride, our common chariot easing from its berth: motion is seeing and felt in cold wind's search, as sparkling reminder laps at railing's side.

crossing to the island, leaving man behind, inching toward being, quiet, protected, free; needing only self and finding it to be endlessly enfolding depth in my love's mind.

deep beneath this water pulses other thought, ebbing when it reasons, flooding when it feels, senses loosened like these glittering waves i see—

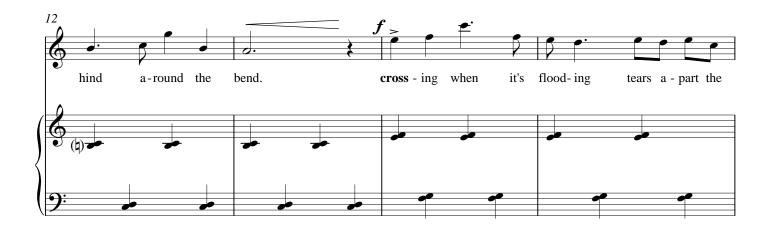
etching in this day and its free wandering; caught, tied in memory of black and white, sealed as totally moving love, as you, as me.

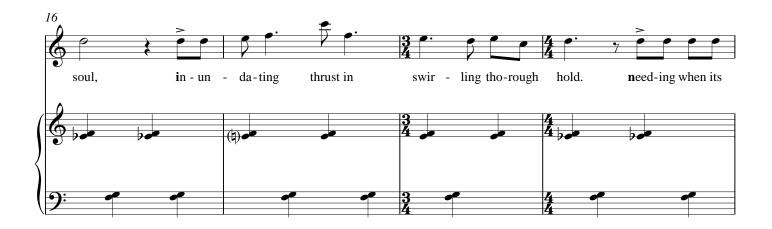
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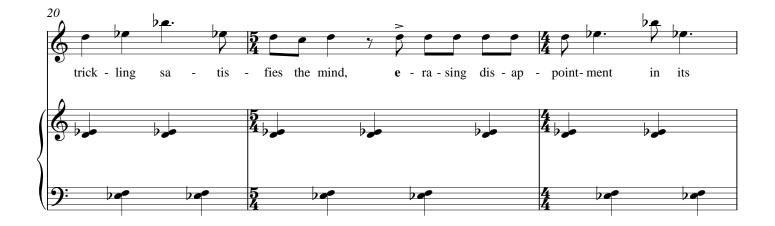


(Play with one hand and mute strings by placing fingers of the other hand on strings inside piano as close to the tuners as possible.)





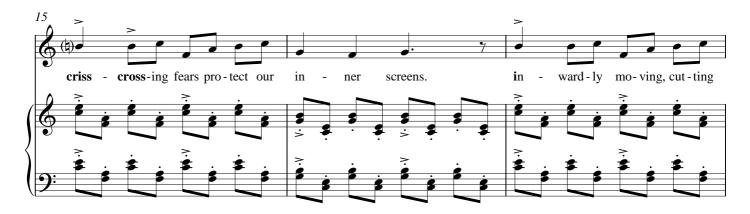




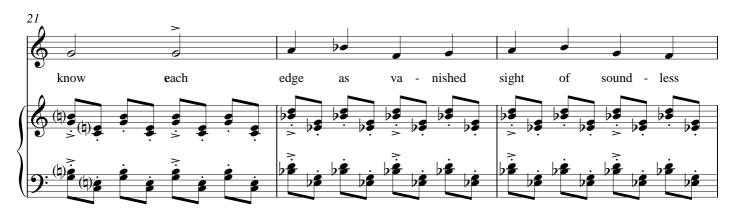


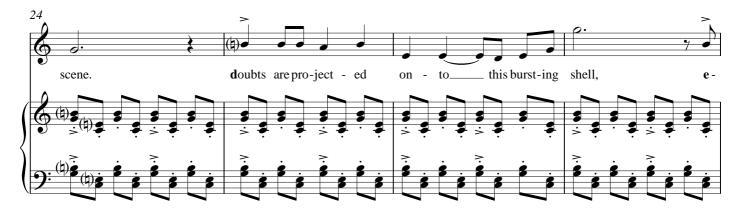
2. the soothing slip to sleep

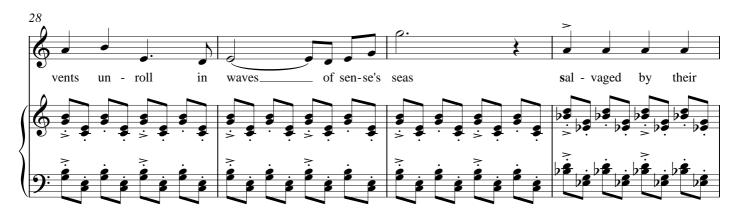




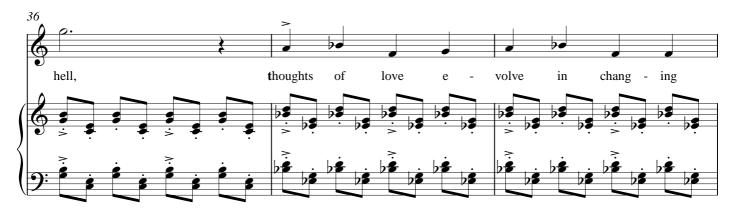


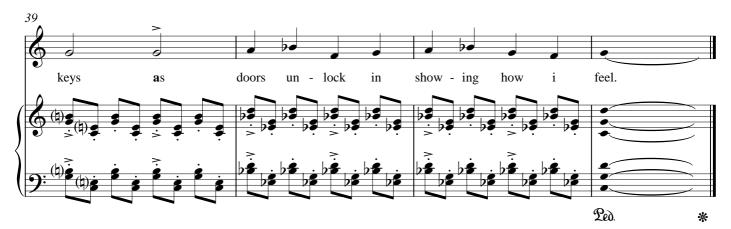




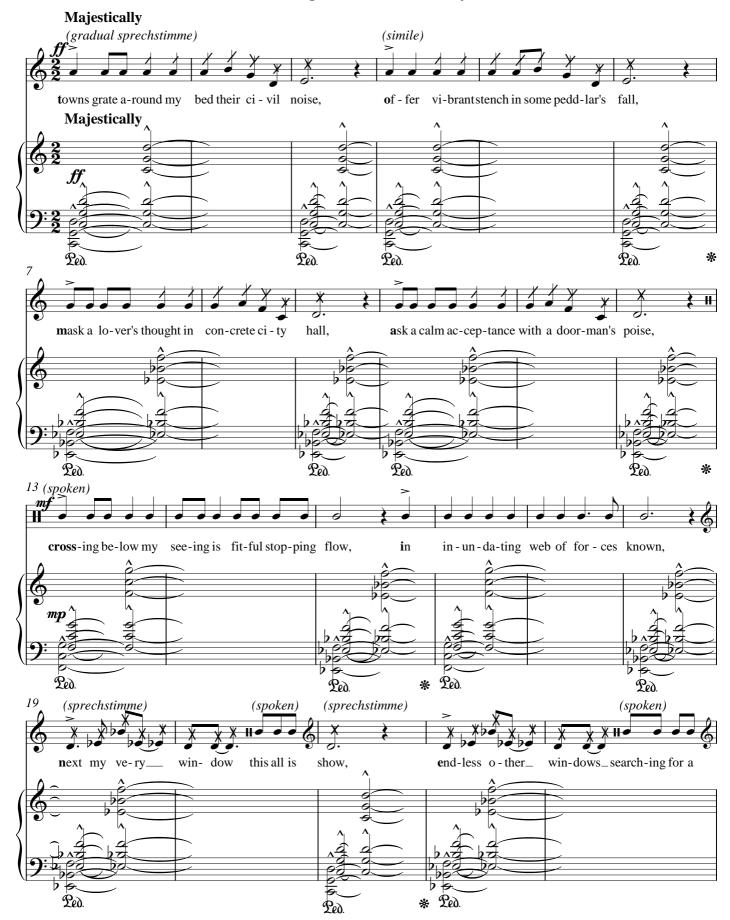








3. towns grate around my bed





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4. twice again the sun returns

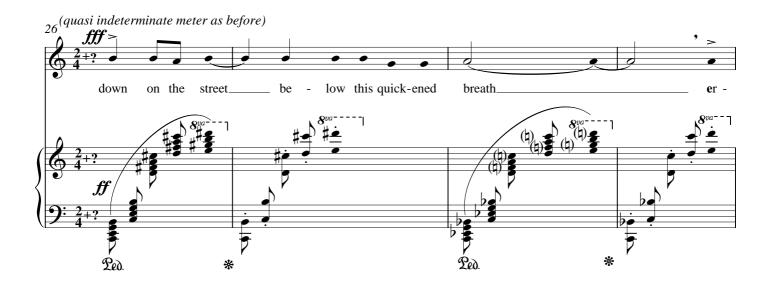
Brisk and Jubilantly

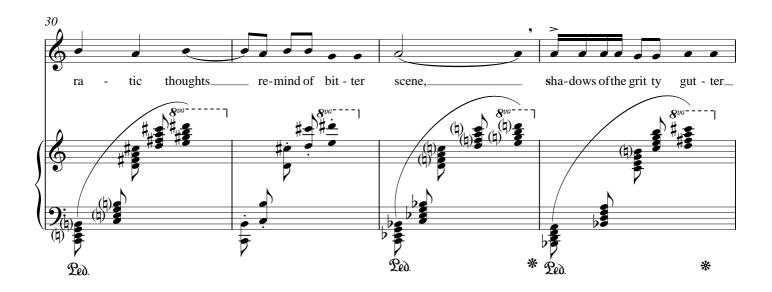
(NOTE: The first two beats of each measure are fixed, but the remainder is indeterminate.)

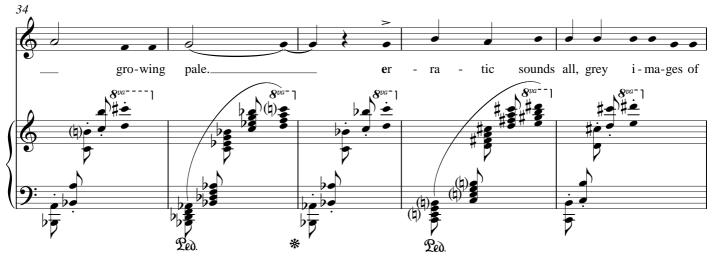


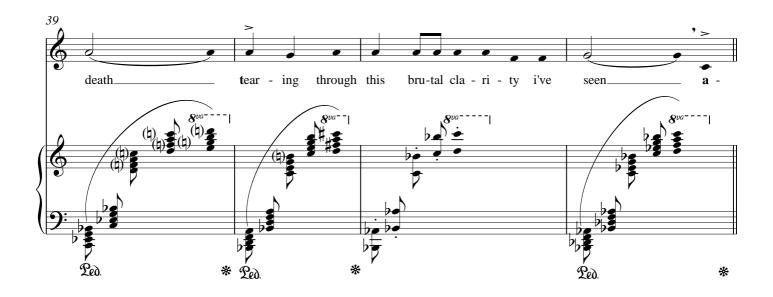
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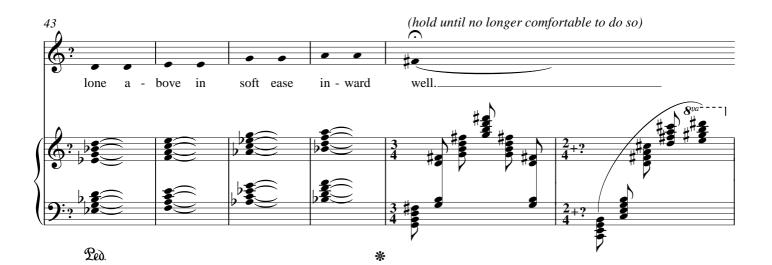


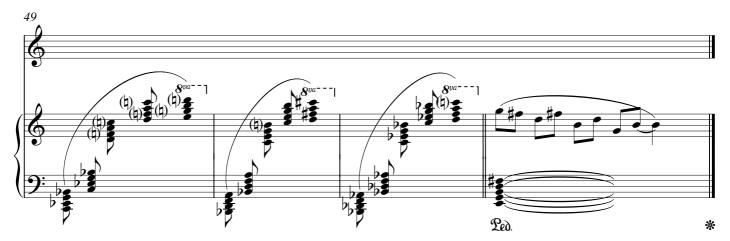








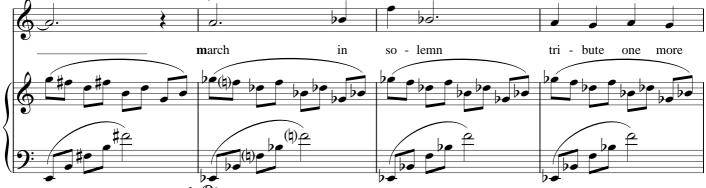




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5. echoes

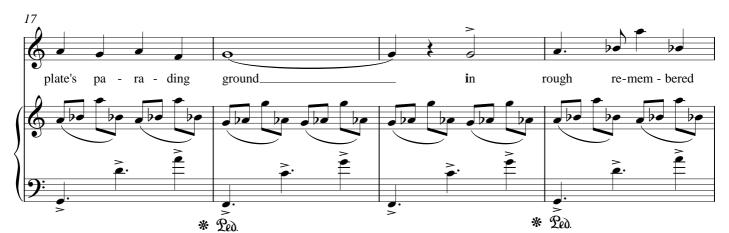


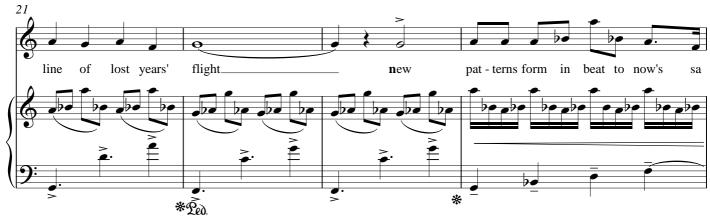


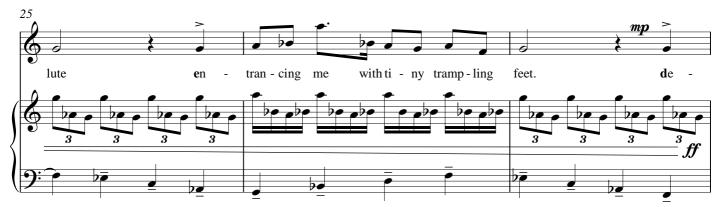


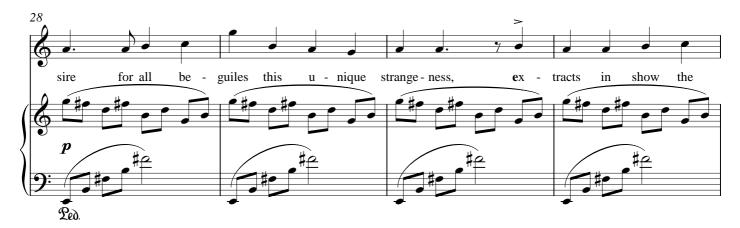
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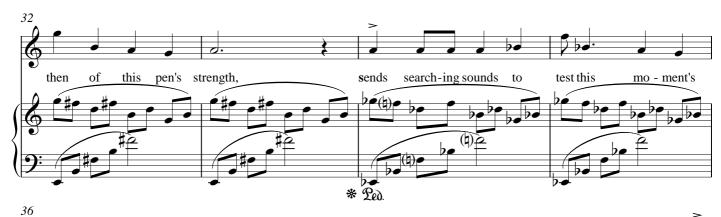
14



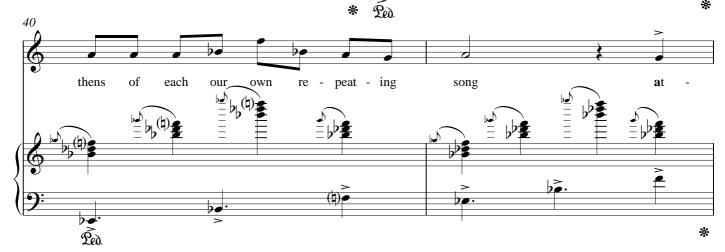


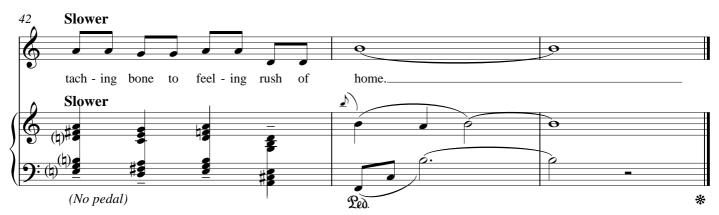






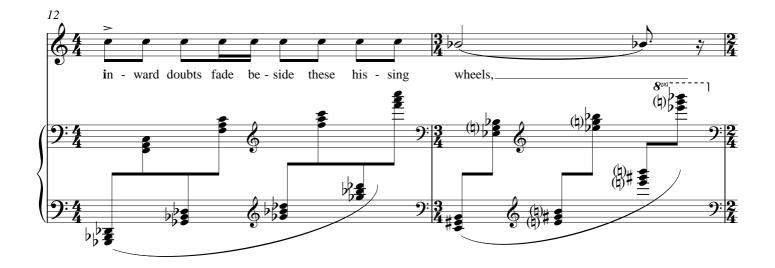


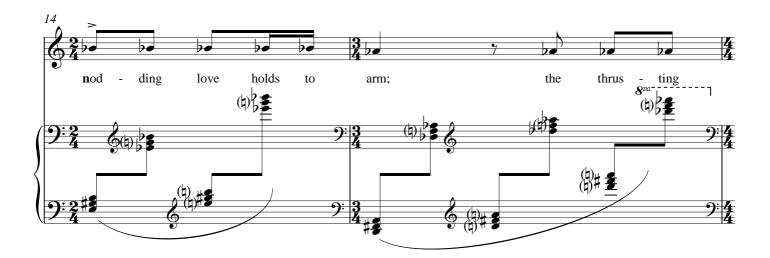


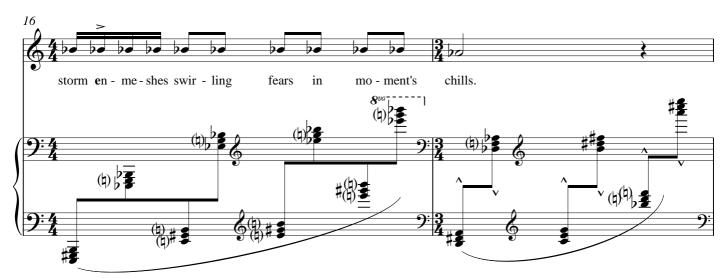




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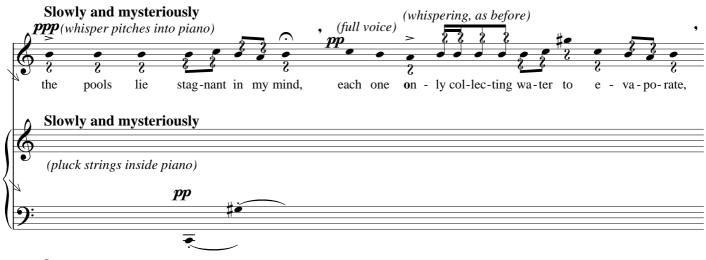




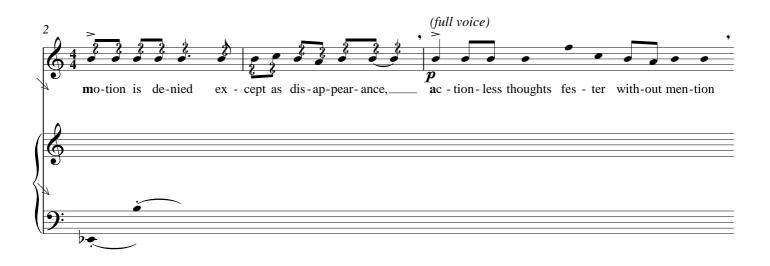


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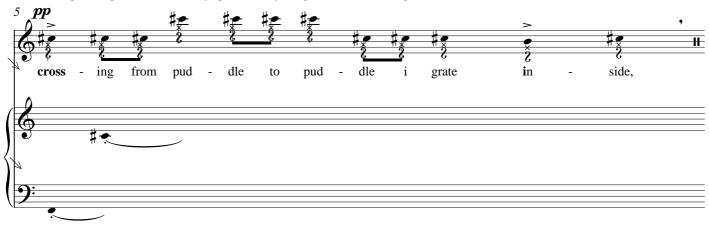
7. the pools lie stagnant in my mind

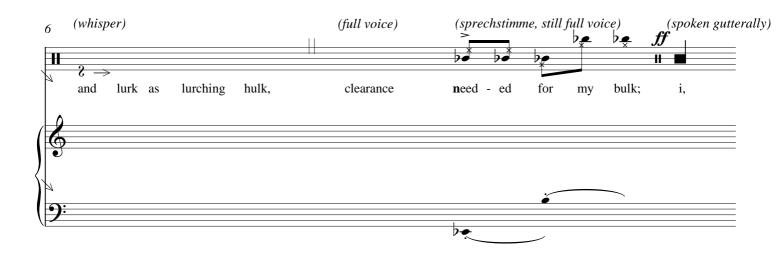


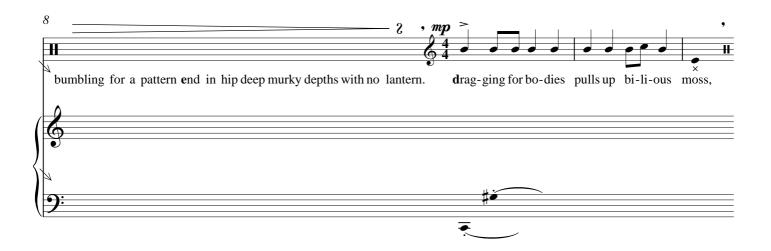
Led. (pedal remains depressed throughout)

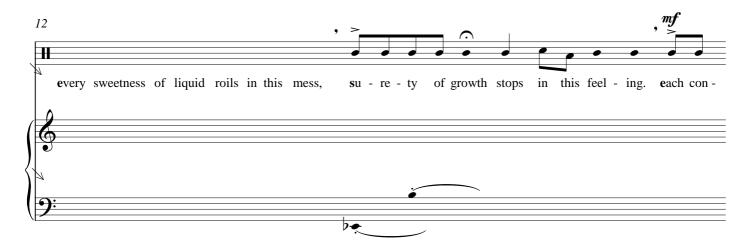


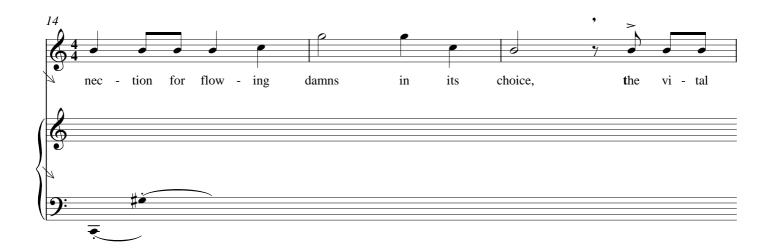
(whispered sprechstimme: half spoken, half sung on the indicated pitches)

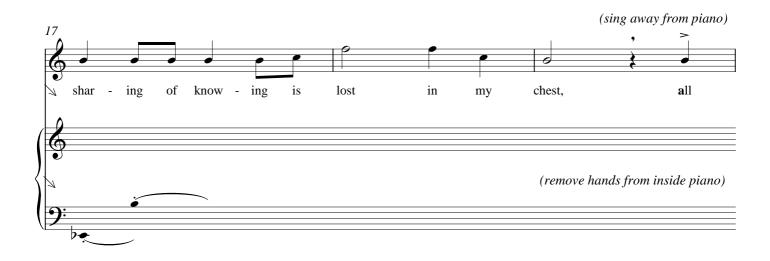


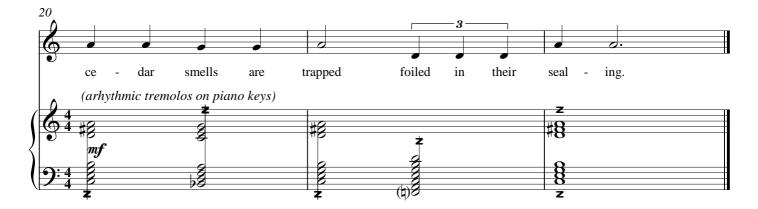








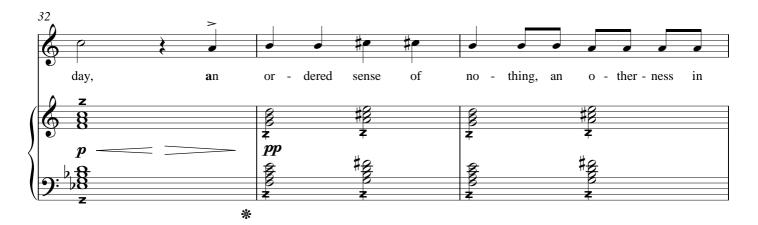


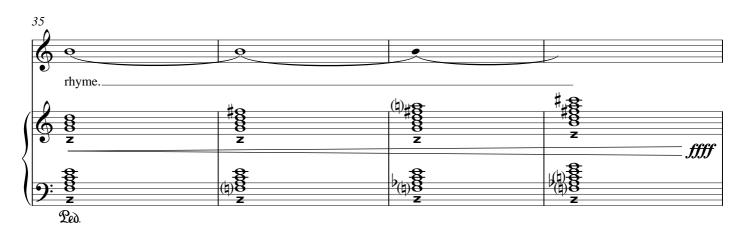


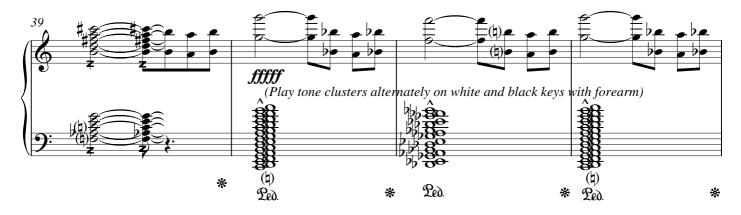
8. the harbor is a hung silence of grey



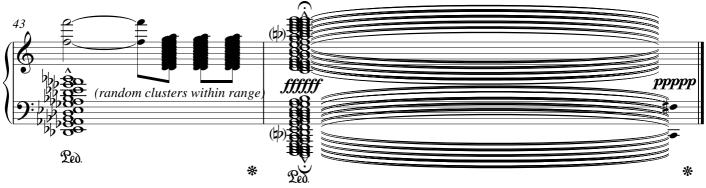




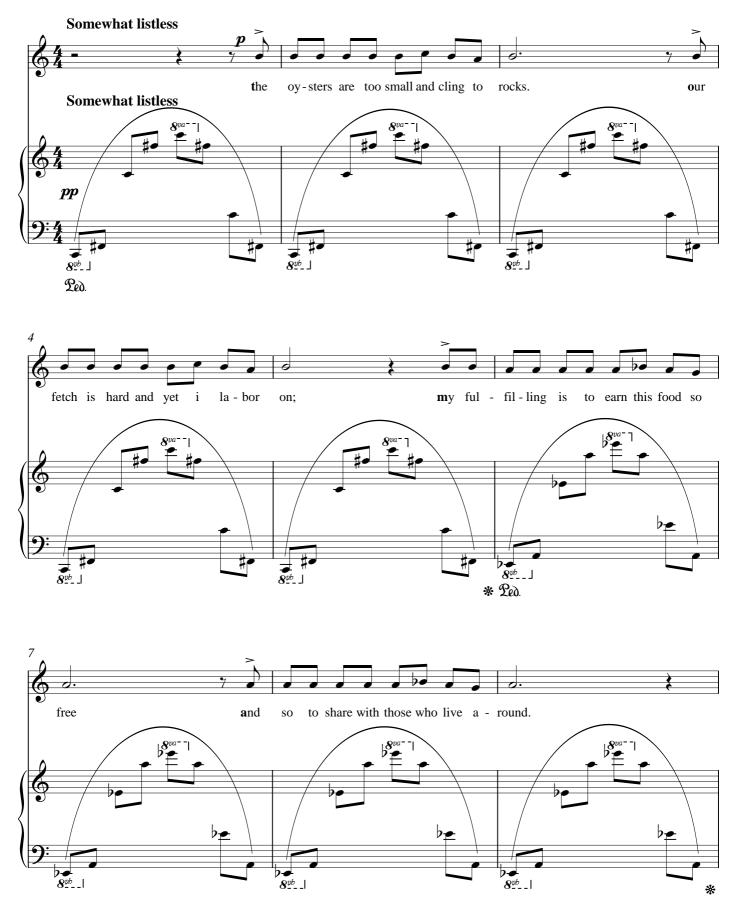




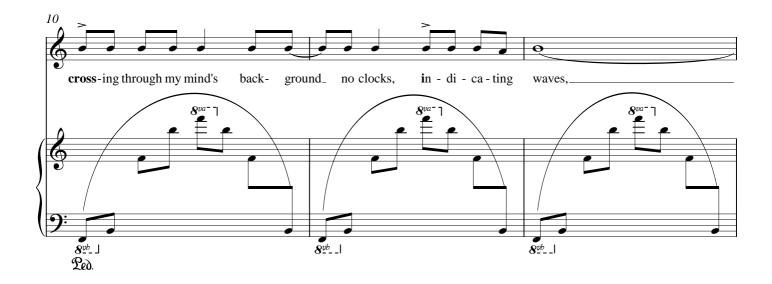
(Full keyboard cluster, after which--keeping pedal depressed--lift forearms and silently depress the 2 indicated piatches, then lift pedal.)

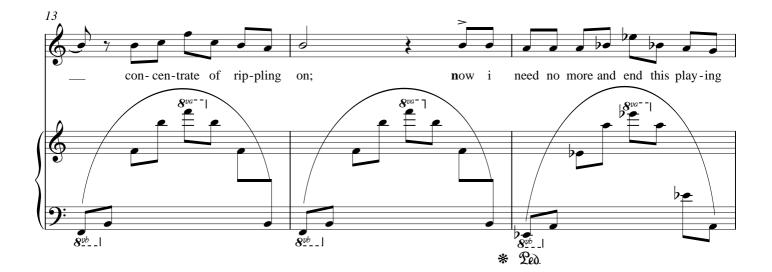


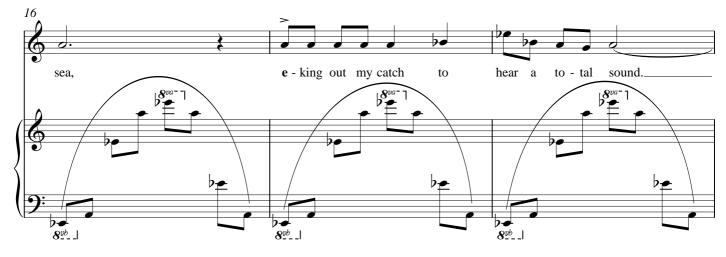
9. the oysters are too small



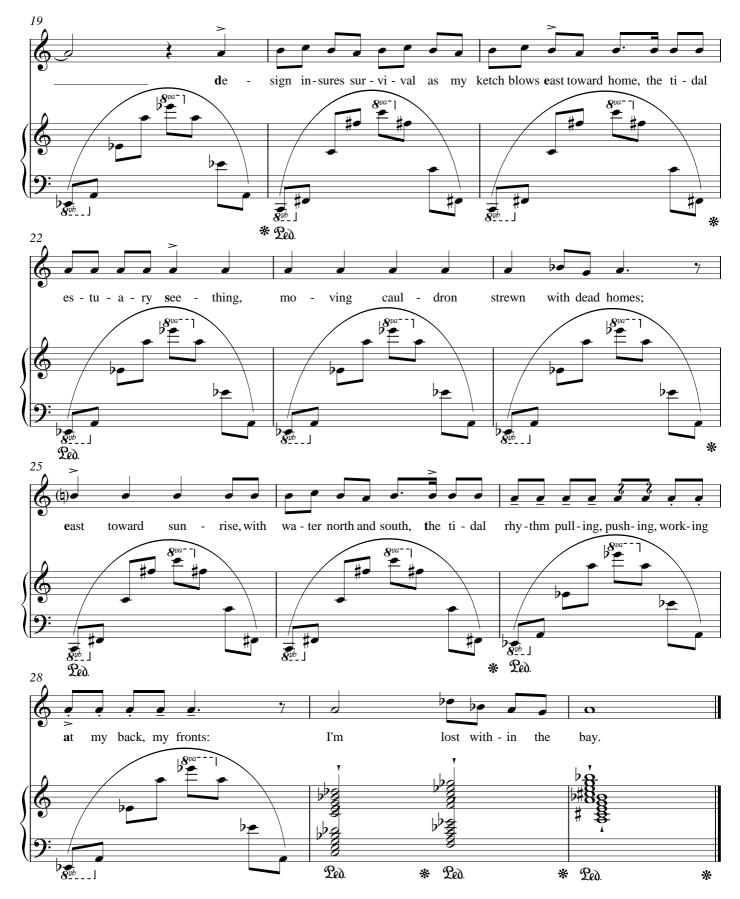
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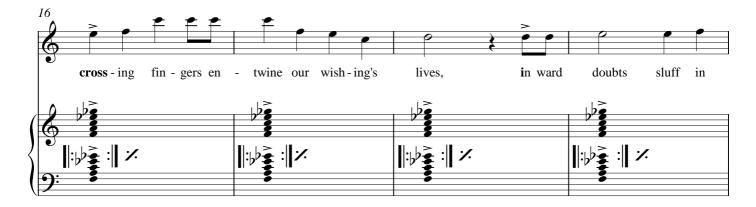
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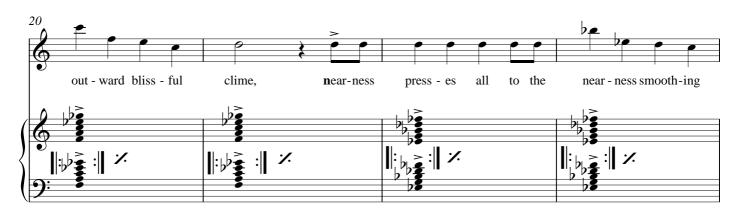


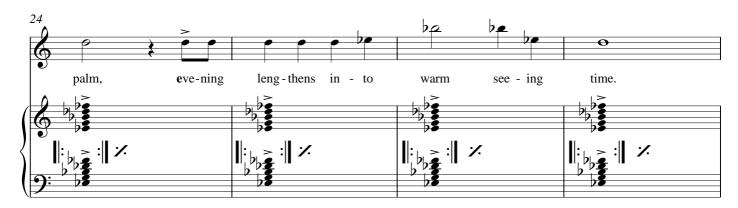
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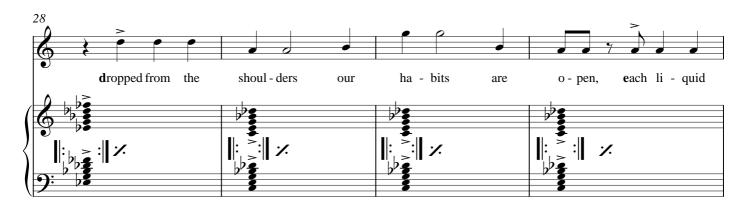
10. this day's mildness

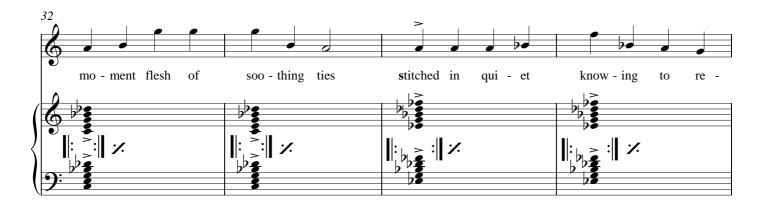


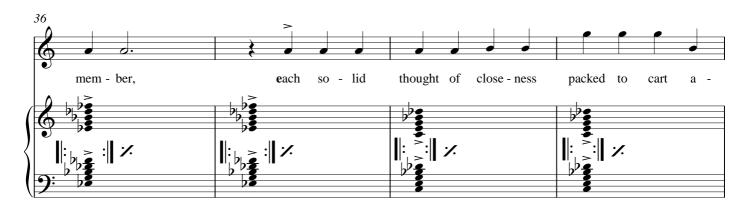


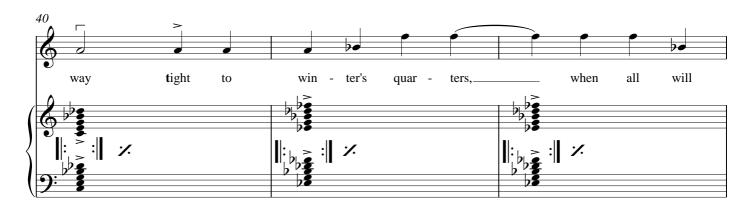


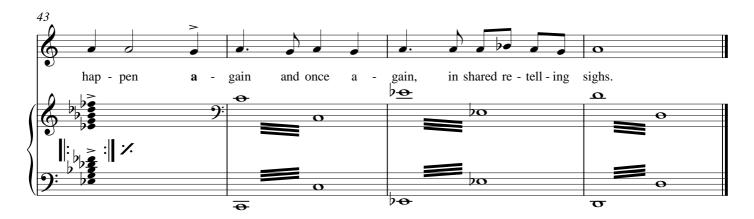




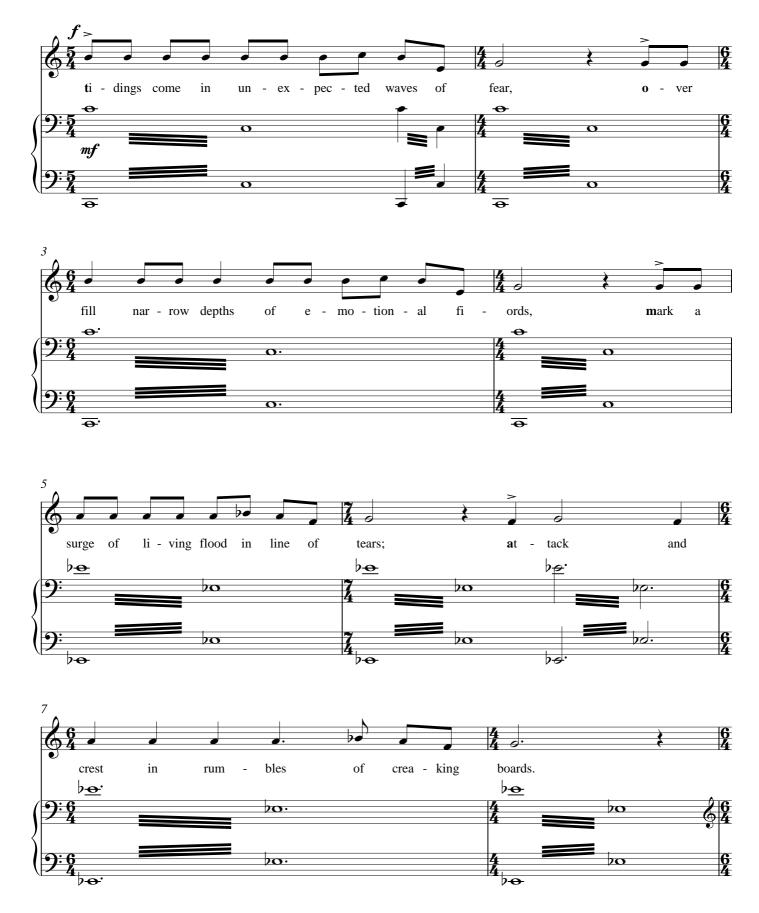




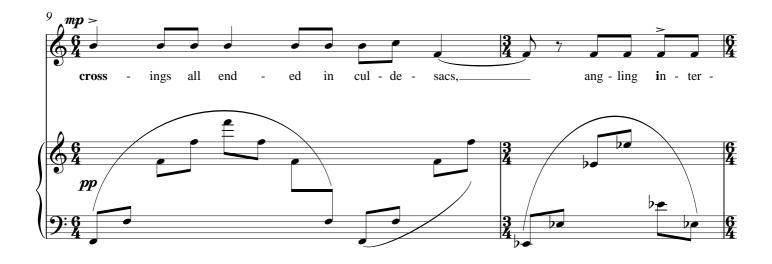


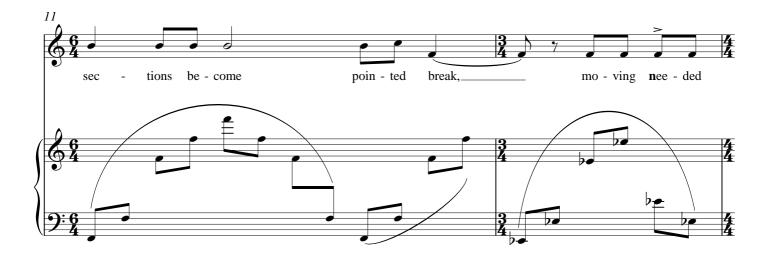


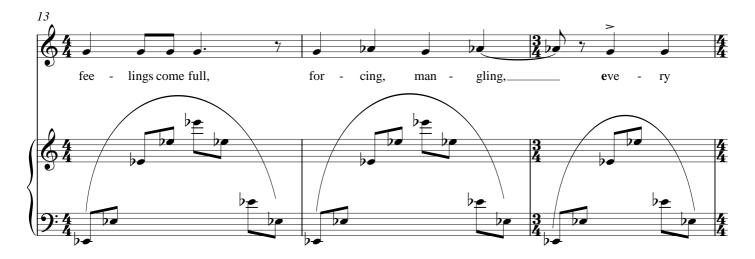
11. tidings



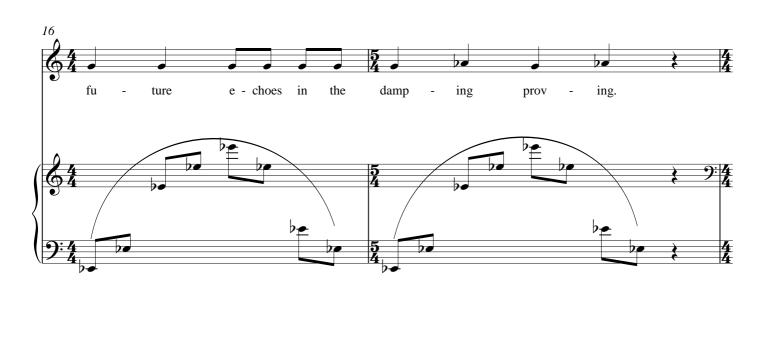
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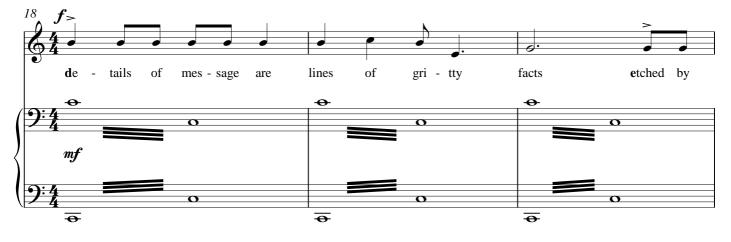


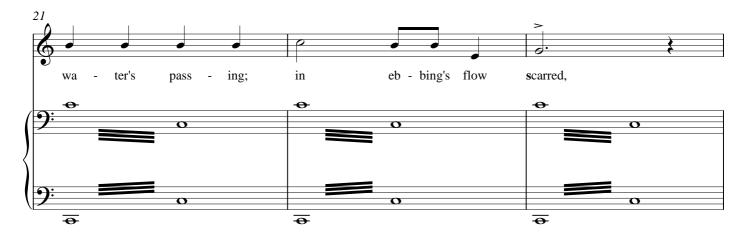




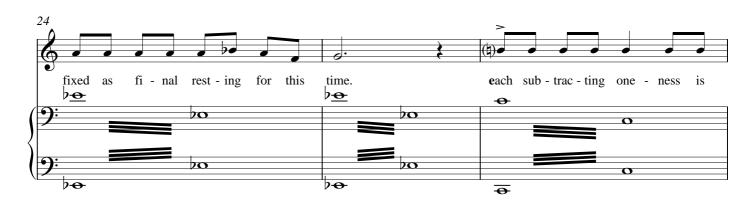
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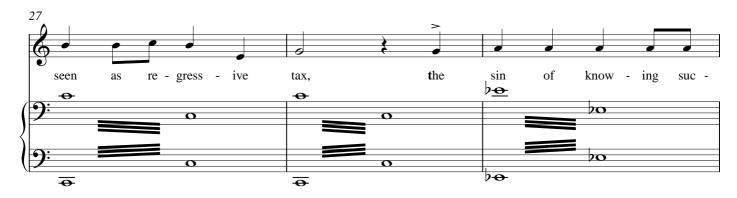


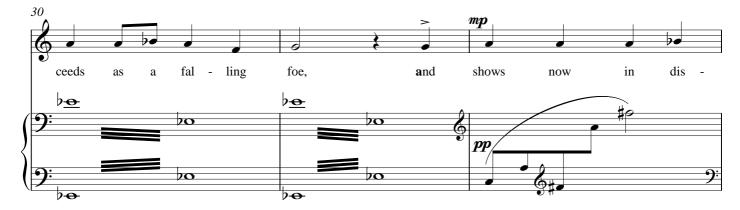


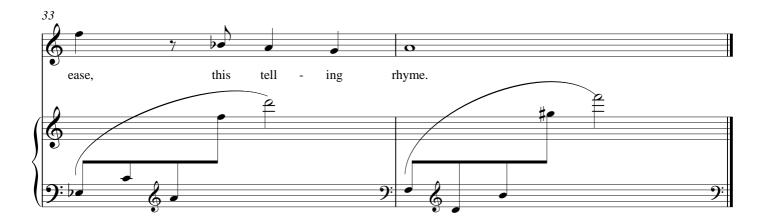


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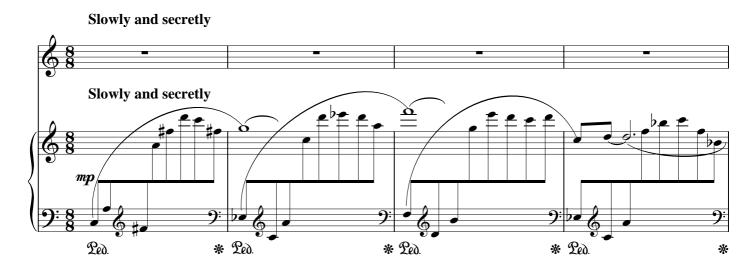


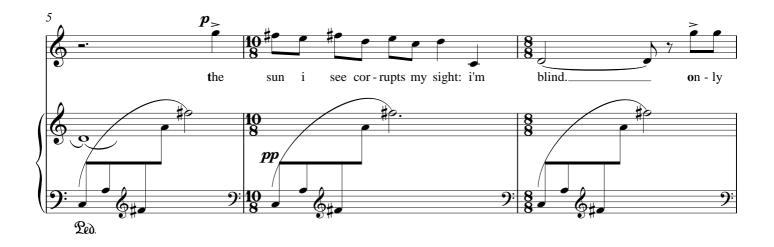


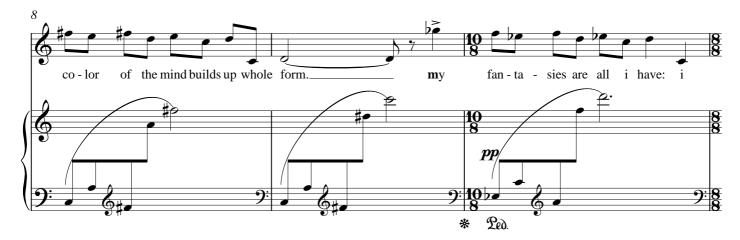














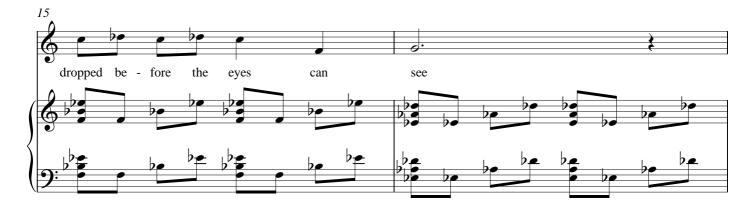
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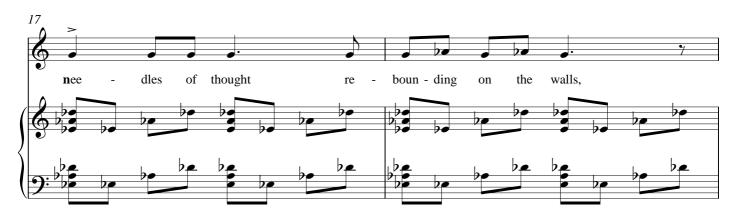


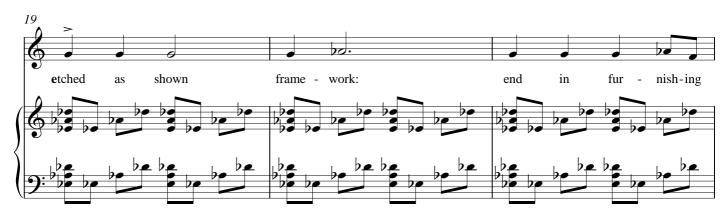
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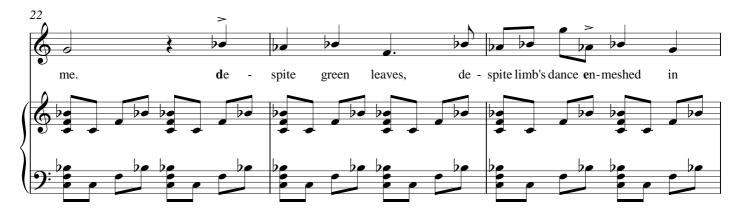
13. the window is closed





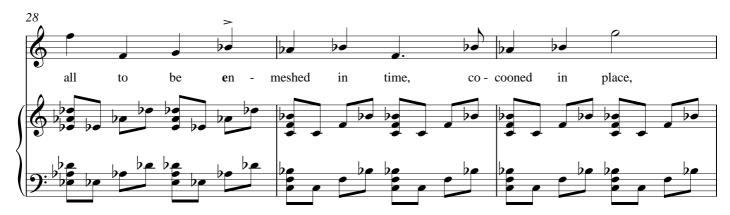


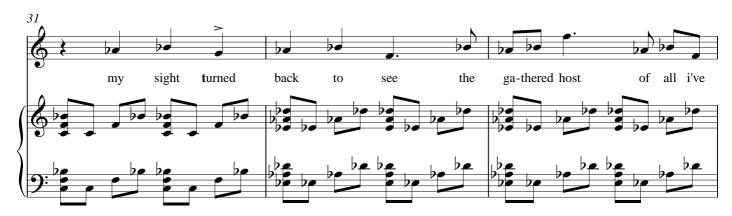


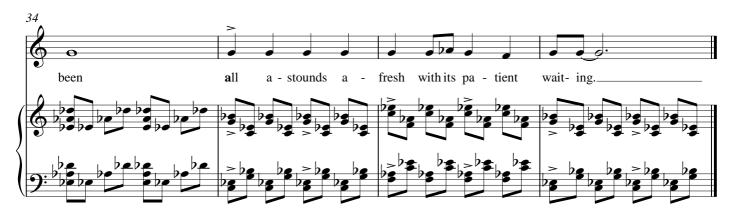


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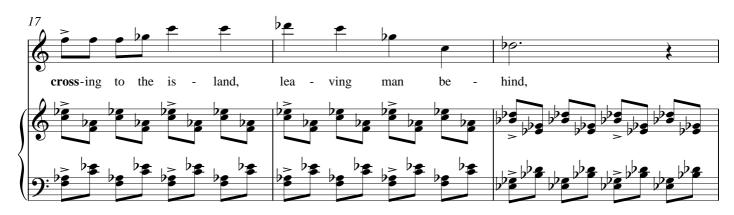


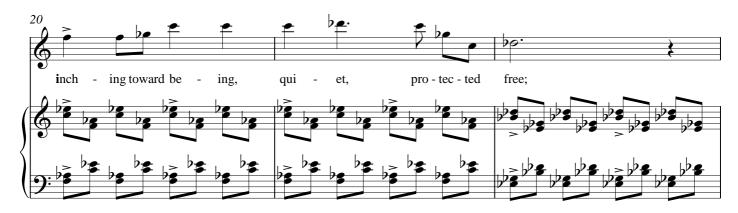




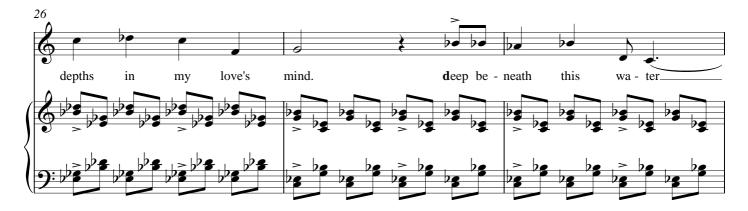






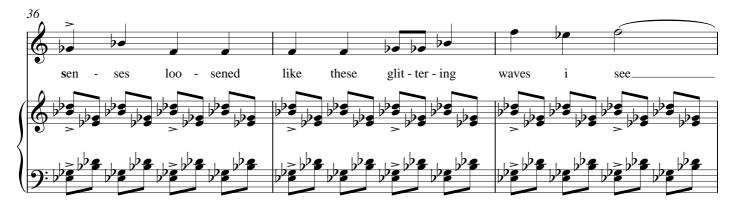


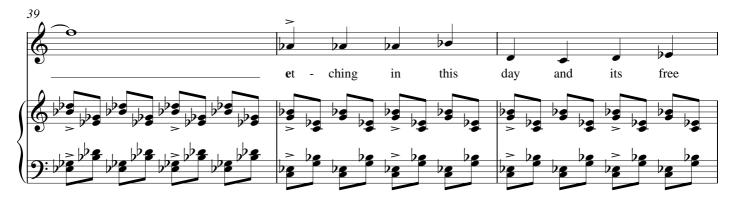


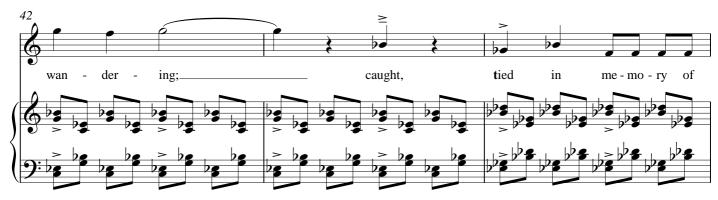


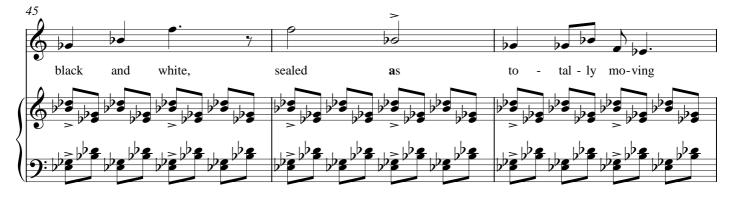


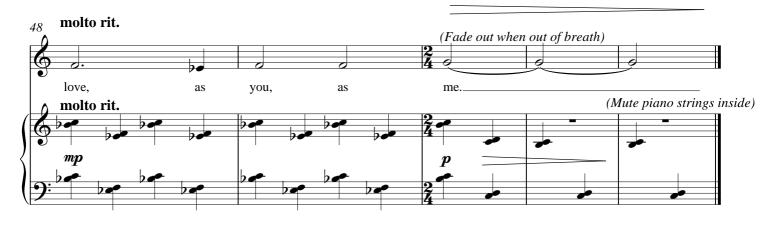












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