

Program Notes

The three unaccompanied choral pieces that comprise *A Whitman Triptych* were composed between 2012 and 2014. *O Setting Sun* was commissioned by the Madison Chamber Choir, Madison, Wisconsin, Anthony Cao, conductor, and received its premiere performance on April 20, 2012. *What Is the Grass?* was commissioned by Cappella SF, Ragnar Bohlin, conductor, and was premiered on February 6, 2015. *Facing West* was commissioned in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge by the International Orange Chorale, Zane Fiala, conductor, and received its premiere performance on May 27, 2012.

I first set Whitman to music in 1986 when I adapted part of *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed* as the basis for my composition *Invocation and Dance* (Catalog No. 4378). I went on to set *Good-Bye, My Fancy* for male chorus and soprano saxophone in 1992 (Catalog No. 4765). Like so many composers, I have found the visionary quality of Whitman's verse inspiring; the vigor and intensity of the poetry seem naturally to draw out music.

Like *O Setting Sun*, *What Is the Grass?* is also an adaptation of a much longer poem, one of Whitman's deepest, and most mysterious. The poem begins as a child-like meditation on grass; as hope, as an embodiment of new life and new growth in the plant world. Suddenly, a somber turn occurs with the line "And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves." Here Whitman enters an extended meditation on how grass connects life and death, informed by his experiences in the Civil War. Hope returns with the line "They are alive and well somewhere," leading to the mysterious final line: "And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier..." Here Whitman affirms that death can be an initiation into a broader participation of existence. In the words of poet Ivan M. Granger, Whitman offers a "Zen-like riddle that doesn't offer an answer so much as a pathway of questioning."

My musical setting follows Whitman's exploration: first taking a child's point of view, expressed with lilting melodies set in a lively compound meter. Then, the entry of the tenor soloist indicates a change of mood to the serious. Next, the first mood returns, leading to a climax on the words "And led forward life...", set in nine-part harmony. The mood turns reverent, as the tenor soloist intones the words "All goes onward and outward; nothing collapses." The piece ends with a tone of gentle, slightly ironic questioning.

—David Conte

II. "What Is the Grass?" from *Song of Myself*

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift designedly dropt,
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

What has become of the young men and old men?
What has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

—Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

Commissioned by Cappella SF, Ragnar Bohlin, Conductor

A Whitman Triptych

Walt Whitman (1891–1892)
A child said, What is the grass?
 D. C., alt.

David Conte

II. What Is the Grass?

for Tenor Solo, SATB Chorus unaccompanied

Allegretto ♩ = 126

f

Soprano
 A child said, — What is the grass? — fetch - *unis.*

Alto
 A child said, — What is the grass? — fetch - *unis.*

Tenor
 A child said, — What is the grass? — *V*

Bass
 A child said, — What is the grass? — *V*

Allegretto ♩ = 126

Keyboard
 (for rehearsal only)

9 (3+2+2+2) *mf*

- ing it to me with full hands; _____ How _

- ing it to me with full hands; _____ How _

p *f* Fetch - ing it to me with full hands; _____

p *f* Fetch - ing it to me with full hands; _____

(3+2+2+2)

15

— could I an-swer the child?... — I do not know what it is — an-y more — than

— could I an-swer the child?... — I do not know what it is — an-y more — than

mp hm _____

mp hm _____

22

p *mf*

he. _____ I guess_ it must be the

p *mf*

he. _____ I guess_ it must be the

mp *p*

buoyant

loo _____ loo _____ loo

loo _____ loo _____ loo

mp *(B 1)* *sim. p*

buoyant

* loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo

27

2

flag_ of my dis-po - si-tion, _ out of hope - ful_ green stuff wov-en, _

2

flag_ of my dis-po - si-tion, _ out of hope - ful_ green stuff wov-en, _

loo _____ loo _____ loo

loo _____ loo _____ loo

loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo

loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo

* Bass 2, mm. 22-41: slight separation between each note.

33 *p* buoyant

loo loo loo loo loo

p buoyant

loo loo loo loo loo

mf unis.

Or I guess it is the hand-ker-chief of the Lord, A

loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo loo

38

loo

loo

scent-ed gift de-sign ed-ly dropt, loo

loo loo loo loo loo loo Or I guess the grass is it-

43

mf *f*

the pro - duced_ babe_ of the veg -

mf *f*

loo_ the pro - duced_ babe of the veg - i -

mf *f*

loo_ the pro - duced_ babe of the veg - i -

mf *f*

self_ a child, the pro - duced_ babe_ of the veg - i - ta -

49

Ten. Solo *mp*

And now it

mp *p*

S - i - ta - tion, loo

mp *p*

A ta - tion. loo

mf *p*

T ta - tion, the veg - i - ta - tion, loo

mp *p*

B - tion. loo

55

seems to me the beau - ti - ful un - cut hair of

loo loo

loo loo

loo loo

loo loo

63

Ten. Solo

graves.

rejoin the section

rit. ♩ = ♩

mp un - cut hair of

T the beau - ti - ful un - cut hair of

mp

B the beau - ti - ful un - cut hair of

rit. ♩ = ♩

70 Andante, somber ♩ = 108

S

A *mp espress.*
What has be-come of the young men — and — old men? *p*

T *pp*
graves. — hmm — loo —
loo

B *pp*
graves. — hmm — loo —

Andante, somber ♩ = 108

79 *mp* *p*
loo loo

mp *p*
loo loo

mp *unis. espress.*
What — has be-come of the wom - en -

mp *unis. espress.*
What — has be-come of the wom - en -

Slower ♩ = 92

mp *rit.* chil - dren? *pp*

the chil - dren?

mp the chil - dren? *pp*

the chil - dren?

and chil - dren, the chil - dren? *pp*

and chil - dren, the chil - dren?

and chil - dren the chil - dren? *p* loo

and chil - dren the chil - dren? loo

rit. *Slower ♩ = 92*

94 Just a bit slower than Tempo I, reflective ♩ = 116

mp *unis.* *espress.* They are a - live and well some -

p *unis.* loo loo

p loo loo

mp *p* *dolce* loo loo

Just a bit slower than Tempo I, reflective ♩ = 116

101 *mf* *p* 2

- where, loo loo

mf 2

The small-est sprout shows there is real-ly no death,

loo loo loo

107 *rit.* *A tempo* ♩ = 116 *mp*

loo And if

mp

And if ev-er there was, and if

mp

no death, And if ev - er there was, -

no death,

rit. *A tempo* ♩ = 116

molto allarg.

Maestoso ♩ = 80

112 *cresc.* *ff*

ev-er there was, _____ ev-er there was, _____ it led for - ward

cresc. *ff*

ev-er there was, _____ ev-er there was, _____ it led for - ward, _____

cresc. *ff*

and if ev - er there was, _____ it led for - ward, _____

mp *cresc.* *ff*

and if ev - er there was, _____ it led for - ward, _____

molto allarg. **Maestoso** ♩ = 80

116 *molto allarg.* **f** **A tempo** ♩ = 80

Ten. Solo _____ And ceased _____ the mo-ment

S life, _____ for-ward life, _____ *mp* loo _____

A for - ward life, _____ for-ward life, _____ *mp unis.* loo _____

T _____ for - ward life, _____ for-ward life, _____ *mp unis.* loo _____

B for - ward, _____ for - ward life, _____ *mp unis.* loo _____

molto allarg. **A tempo** ♩ = 80

rit.

Moderately slow, reverent $\text{♩} = 66$

123

p *mf dolce, espress.*

life ap - peared All goes on - ward and out - ward,

p *unis. p (stagger breathing)*

loo oo *p (stagger breathing)*

loo oo *p (stagger breathing)*

loo oo *p (stagger breathing)*

loo oo *unis. p (stagger breathing)*

loo oo

rit.

Moderately slow, reverent $\text{♩} = 66$

130

rit.

rejoin the section

Noth - ing col - laps - es,

oo *p* And to

rit.

136 *Andante* ♩ = 84

p *mp* *mf* an - y - one sup-

S And to die is dif-fer-ent from what an - y - one

p *mp* *mf*

A And to die is dif-fer-ent from what an - y - one

tutti unis. *p* *mp* *mf*

T And to die is dif-fer-ent from what an - y - one

mp *mf*

B die, to die is dif-fer-ent from what an - y - one

Andante ♩ = 84

140 posed, _____ *p*

mp *mp unis.* *p* 3

sup - posed, _____ and luck - i - er.

mp *p* *mp unis.* *p* 3

sup - posed, _____ and luck - i - er.

mp *p*

* sup - po - - - - -

mp *p* *pp*

* sup - po - - - - -

sup - po - - - - - *pp*

* Tenors and basses do not sing the final consonant of the word "supposed."

November 21–December 13, 2011
San Francisco
4'30"