NOTES

On a 19th Century Color Lithograph of Red Riding Hood by the Artist J. H. is the fourth and last song in a cycle titled *The Land of Nod*. More a scene than a song, *Red Riding Hood* is a character study that I delighted in writing for the renowned tenor Paul Sperry. *The Land of Nod* was commissioned by and is dedicated to Paul, a dear friend for over thirty years. The poems for the set are by his childhood friend, Alice Wirth Gray. In 1992, Paul telephoned me and exclaimed, "I've just read a new book of poetry and thought immediately of you." I had to admit that Paul was right. Alice Wirth Gray's quirky sense of humor was right up my alley. Paul and I premiered the work together at Merkin Hall in 1993.

—Tom Cipullo April 24, 2020

Tom Cipullo (b. 1956)

For biographical information visit: www. tomcipullo.net

TEXT

The wolf makes a funny face not to be taken seriously as evil, but as if there's something wrong with his eyes. He's old and getting cataracts or he's trying to start a conversation by winking at Riding Hood, where she stands by a cheery spread of amanita phalloides, wondering how to get back to her basket of goodies which she left on the other side of the clearing while gathering flowers, and now of course the wolf blocks her way. Some people have a crucifix over the bed: I have a wolf.

The NIGHT POLICE Interrogate Riding Hood: Nice try, kid, but daisies don't grow in that woods. Look at those trees, their trunks acid-green with moss. There's not enough light in there for an impatiens or a cineraria. And that basket with the bottle of Bordeaux sticking out. Explain that. This is a German forest if ever one was: grim Grimm, blacker than Black. Don't you tell us about Perrault: for you all stories with fear in them will always be German. Your mom is sending you through these woods by yourself with a bottle of imported wine? You expect us to buy that? Save us all time. You knew that wolf. You've been encouraging him.

I've always loved that picture because there's Riding Hood far left and the wolf far right and the center absolutely empty. So much space between girl and wolf that is so much more interesting than either of them. You can see into and into the woods until it's so dark you can't. You can see such a long way into the story.

What RIDING HOOD Told the Cops: Of course I talked to him, it's what the books say to do: try to keep them talking.
Reason with them. Look, Mr. Wolf, sit down. We'll drink the bottle.
Then we'll go on to Grandma's and redden our teeth on her.
They sent me here.
They must have known the way the world is.

Myself, I would like to get past all that little-girl-and-the-wolf thing into the dark beyond them both. Honestly, I thought it must be a rite of passage. That the solution might be hidden in the basket under the white cloth. When I peeked, I found she'd sent me off in the dark without so much as a flashlight.

The Report of the NIGHT POLICE We picked the girl up in the woods. Rather, what we mean to say is that's where we took her into custody. She looks like an angel, but you just can't tell What was in the basket, we wanted to know. Was she trying to get rid of something? We asked her to explain herself, and she says her mother hung the lithograph of a wolf over her bed. A likely story. What woman would do a thing like that? There may be enough evidence to run her folks in, too.

The WOLF:
For God's sake.
I was lost.
Can't you tell?
She seemed to mistake me for someone she knew.
I didn't want to frighten her.
You're not going to try to hang this one on me, are you? I'd never have gone there alone.
That's why we always travel in packs.
I mean it's dark in there.
Dangerous.

Testimony of the HUNTER:
So I heard all this yelling
from the old lady's cottage
a female in distress I sez
and I don't think twice
but bust down the door
gun at the ready
and that kid and the wolf
(that's him over there,
yer honor) well, you wouldn't
believe it, the amount of blood
and that kid does she have
a mouth on her it embarrasses me
when girls talk so foul like that

if she was my daughter
I'd beat her till she was civil
and I'd crack all the teeth
in her dirty mouth and I'd
take away her clothes and lock her up
to sit in her own filth until
she'd learned a little respect.
What's that, sir? You want me
to stand down? Well, sure,
if you say so.

MOTHER:

Of course I hung the lithograph over her bed. It's a work of art. You think something like that is going to scare that child? Anyway, I had to put it somewhere, it was a gift. And let me tell you, there was a perfectly safe path around those woods, through a public park, and well patrolled. But not her. You couldn't keep her from looking for trouble, and able to find it where there is none. My husband was no help at all: what do you expect a mother to do? Oh, if only we'd been rich enough to buy her a car.

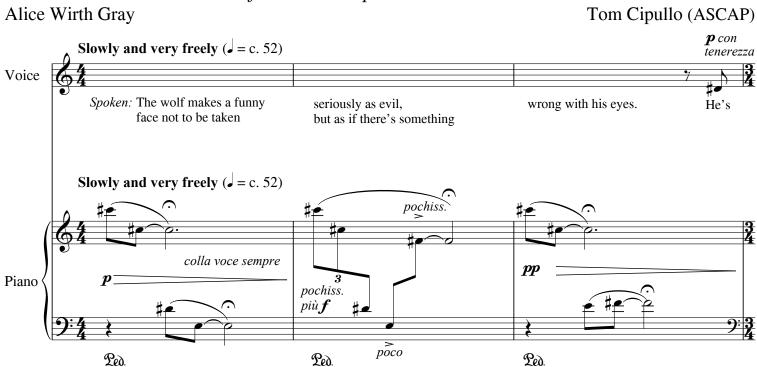
It was all so complicated: who was this Riding Hood? I never liked the grandmother. Sometimes the wolf wasn't so bad: he could have eaten the girl there in the forest but he put off a present treat to eat a stringy old lady in the future. That's not the reasoning of a beast. Then, never did I doubt he liked Riding Hood more than the others did. What do you mean? What do I see in the picture? Is this some kind of Rorschach? I want to talk to my attorney. It was my mother who hung the picture over my bed. Those dark woods, beckoning, a challenge. A place to go to from the place you are

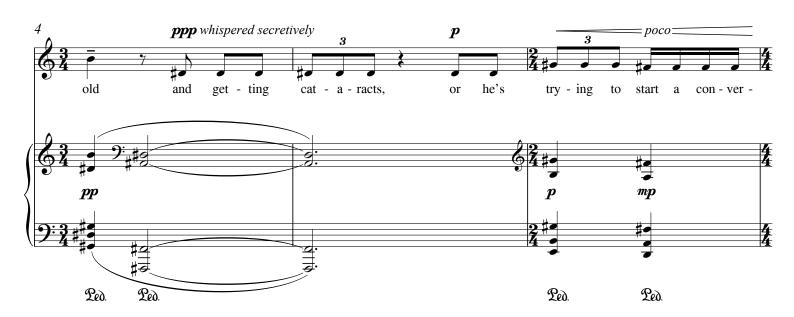
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Commissioned by Paul Sperry

On a 19th Century Color Lithograph of Red Riding Hood by the Artist J. H.

for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano





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