



Sanctuary Walls

Music by
Forrest Wentzel

Poetry by
Brian Griffin

with
Karen Nickell, mezzo-soprano
Andrew Wentzel, bass
Julia Haas, piano

Amira Parkey, 16, had just uttered her first lines as Miss Hannigan in “Annie, Jr.” when the performance at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church was interrupted by a loud pop, witnesses said.

“We were just, ‘Oh, my God, that’s not part of the play,’ ” Amira said, adding that she saw a man standing near the door of the sanctuary and firing into the room.

It took a beat longer for fear to strike the audience.

“The music director realized what was going on and she yelled, ‘Get the hell out of here, everybody,’ ” said Sheila Bowen, 70, a church member.

Parents dove under the pews with their children, and the cast of young actors, some of them as young as 6, was quickly herded out of the sanctuary.

None of the victims were children.

Members of the church tackled the gunman and wrested his weapon, a 12-gauge shotgun, from him. The police received a call to the church at 10:18 a.m. and took the gunman into custody four minutes later.

...

There were about 200 people in the church when the gunman opened fire, church members said. Witnesses said that the gunman, carrying a guitar case, had first tried to enter the area where the children were preparing for the play, saying he was there to play music.

The New York Times
July 28, 2008

A Note from the Poet

I wrote *Single Lens Reflex* because I felt a sense of guilt about the death of a friend and what happened under my watch -- an assault on a sanctuary full of children. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, I realized that I might have the ability to communicate what trauma feels, looks, and sounds like. I vowed that day to capture my experience in words, and I hoped that perhaps those words would raise awareness of trauma and hate crime to a complacent nation, a nation that seems to be a bit too willing to allow mass shootings – and mass trauma – to continue as a part of what it means to be “a true American.” I chose poetry because the analytical aspect of prose would veer me away from what is most important – the moment, and what it does to the body and mind. I’ve been working on it for years. I’ve struggled to write a statement for the very first page of the book that might serve as a kind of trigger warning. This is how it stands right now:

*This is a book not of healing, but of witness
Not of solace, but of pain
It’s a hard look at the hard reality
of hatred
and its consequences*

We need to recognize the horror of violent hatred. For those who experience it, recognition can be a first step toward peace and healing. This book is my own recognition. It’s not for everyone.

I write as a process of discovering what I think – of the place I live in, of the world around it, of the pain and the beauty, of family and friends, of the history that gnaws at the edges of everything we are. I write because words are more important than thought alone. Thought is fleeting and incomplete. Words nail it down for good or ill – but for good if we work at it. I write because writing is the only way I can begin to understand. I hope this work helps others understand, too.

Brian Griffin

A Note from the Composer

I was not in the sanctuary when this act of violence was carried out, but the attack on the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church violated the sanctuary of a widespread community of people, including myself, who identified with and supported the values upheld by their congregation.

The loss of life depicted by *Sanctuary Walls* results in no glory and spreads no message of salvation. In that sense, this work is not a Passion nor is it a Requiem. These poems which I have selected from Brian Griffin's larger work, *Single Lens Reflex*, expose the grotesque and surreal nature of violence. While I could not encompass the full scale of the devastation as portrayed by *Single Lens Reflex*, I intended for *Sanctuary Walls* to be an experiential companion piece, an unflinchingly direct representation of Griffin's words.

Forrest Wentzel

About the Artists

Brian Griffin holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Virginia. His fiction, poetry and essays have been widely published in literary journals and anthologies, and his collection *Sparkman in the Sky and Other Stories* received the Mary McCarthy Prize for Short Fiction. He has taught writing at the University of Virginia and the University of Tennessee. He is former Director of Lifespan Religious Education at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Julia Haas holds a Master of Music in piano performance from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. During her time as a graduate assistant, she taught Class Piano, worked as a vocal coach and accompanist, and played for UT Opera Theatre, where she discovered a passion for collaboration. Julia currently performs in and around Knoxville, teaches private lessons, works for Volunteer Piano as a tuner and technician, and holds the position of Artist in Residence at Resurrection Presbyterian Church.

Karen Nickell, "with a supple, pliant mezzo-soprano, wonderfully sensitive to the interplay of words and music" (*Chicago Tribune*) came to public attention with her professional debut in the title role in Peter Brook's acclaimed Lincoln Center production of *La Tragédie de Carmen*. Ms. Nickell has performed major roles with opera companies throughout the United States and abroad, including Vancouver Opera, Spoleto Festival in Spoleto, Italy, New Orleans Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Hawaii Opera Theatre, Michigan Opera Theater, Fort Worth Opera, Columbus Opera, Mobile Opera, Anchorage Opera and Knoxville Opera. A native of Salina, Kansas, Ms. Nickell currently resides in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Andrew Wentzel An exciting and commanding figure in opera houses and concert halls throughout the world, bass-baritone Andrew Wentzel was declared a "vocal standout ... who alone achieved a touch of human emotion through strong, sensitive singing" by *Opera News* following performances of Banquo in *Macbeth*. *The Washington Times* agreed, lauding his "flexible but powerful voice" which has "vocal reserves to spare and total abandon in his phrasing." After making his Metropolitan Opera debut, Mr. Wentzel went on to perform numerous roles at the Met over the next ten seasons while maintaining a significant presence in opera houses and with symphony orchestras across North America and Japan. In 1996, Andy and his wife, mezzo-soprano Karen Nickell, along with son Forrest set down roots in Knoxville, TN where he taught at the University of Tennessee for 26 years. He served as UT's Anthem Man for all home football games for 19 seasons, performing for over 12 million fans.

Forrest Wentzel is a Knoxville-based musician, composer and producer. In addition to *Sanctuary Walls*, he has written several works for chamber ensemble, including two compositions for string quartet, and a genre-spanning album, *An Awful Lot*. Television networks that have used music by Wentzel in their broadcasts include ABC, Food Network, and Investigation Discovery. He holds a BA in Russian Language from Oberlin College.

Sanctuary Walls

What a Hate Crime Sounds Like

The Way a Minnow is a Dream

View from the Bloody Pond

Morning

Dogwood

That Look

Interlude

Three Shots (First, Second, Third)

Interlude

Things I Might Have Thought in Those Moments

Interlude

It

Sanctuary Walls is written for voice and orchestra.

Today's performance will use the piano reduction.

Single Lens Reflex will be published by Iris Press (irisbooks.com)
in the spring of 2024.

What a Hate Crime Sounds Like

The name of this poem is thirteen ways of looking at a guitar case so without doubt this poem will fail to live up to its name.

June bugs circle the lawn like catgut on a peg, song curled across confection, seeds without cue—show that thirteen ways,

I say, show that: I have deep emotion about what hides inside things. I want to understand the workings of the inner ear, to find out if it is possible

that when he lay in his casket, my grandfather's hammer, anvil and stirrup could still shiver to *Amazing Grace: I on the pew thinking of baseball*

and across the stream the field and the vast woods beyond, and the utter loss
I say show that thirteen ways. Wallace Stevens danced around the heart.

I saw a man lose his heart one morning; the lid of the guitar case hinging open like a chest, and by that I mean the chest of a man who lost his heart.

Wallace Stevens danced around the heart and left us grappling with the cruel shape of words, perfect sight, the open eye unable to blink and turn, *the utter loss*

and now this gallery of sound, all sound hung in rows like showers of snow.
I on the pew thinking of water striders aloft on the tension of the pond

and below, the vast world of paramecia and amoeba, rotifers and diatoms
and in the casket my grandfather, *soundless dot on his disc of snow*

and there I say, there I see: no one can walk into a sanctuary and just like that—*safe as we are in alabaster chambers*, the poet says, and there the open eye

saying, *I cannot, will not, show you to the door where the spirit rises: find it for yourself.*

just like that, the door a twilight pond, sun rising, sun setting, air like un-spun wool

saying *In this guitar case is whatever you seek: in this guitar case is what you came for,*

the lid opening like a dark hard rose, and what you find inside that studied wilt

depends on what you choose to be: cusp of silence before the sound, or the sound of the sound becoming a sound: that, or silence as water,

all beneath the pond buffered from thunder: minnows as questions, as air
the choice in the end being false: you choose what you hold in your heart

and loose from the case what you hold in your fist, opening,
fingers lifting sweet and long like Mary's at the foot of the cross,

the sound of June bugs circling toward sky on a hot July day:
that sky, that open hand calling you in, calling you sweet in that long, hard song

The Way a Minnow is a Dream

This pond is the palm of a hand
the way the eye is a skein
the way the brain is a net

This pond is the flame of a dream
the way a wink is a fist
a thought, a fish

This pond is the glint of a road
the way a glance is a blade
memory ice

View from the Bloody Pond

From here the red sky wavers,
trees rubber in glass-shiver,

air glass-water, dry-muck of gun-smoke
sound-mirror, light mucked in glass.

Air-cracked lips smear in sheen flow,
the tongue pulls low, stick-stiff in mud,

face suck-teething the deep mire—
something strong there, deep there:

deep sweet wet cake
snow-cream algae, minnow kisses,

minnows blood-dull before that last flash:
silent world sweet below the stain,

and there the end: blessed sweet-wet minnows
swarming wet-sweet, slant-glass, airless light

Morning*

At dawn's
cold blood

moon pockets
bats' flight

hides
in light

Birds cackle
crackling air,

sun mops
space

washed in dawn's
shell-

-cracked
blood

Dogwood

Blossoms open to wilt and resurrection.
I take a pen of light and ink the lawn.
Who are these people, angry at worms?

Tree bark scales, peels:
scabrous fish of Galilee,
etched maze of mockingbird song.

*for complete poem, see appendix

Wise dogs, silent on leashes, nose cocoons,
sniff what arcs across grass blade.
These trees need help, say the worms,
nudging away on little worm bodies.

I met a guy charged with the health of blossoms.
He knew about fungus and other mocking death.
I splayed my spattered hand to feel the poison.
I hared my chest, dared another spray.

Sun palms the youngest buds with fire,
fails the spaces blank from last year's budding

It's all a festival of death

So yeah, sure

I'll stand, watch

humor another deception

gape another spring

Sure

I'll dive into the mire of summer

wallow in the veins of the pond

live it all again

It makes as much sense as anything else

That Look

He got the death chop of a Chickamauga hog.

He got that Chattanooga dirt-eye bone-lust,
that blood-jowl bristle-tuft
jaw chew.

He got that warp-hoof carrion-cut
mouth-rip of maggot flesh,

that gray hide quiver-wallow
shiver-belly body-jerk
of butt-kicked battlefield pork,
lean as a hollow pencil.

He got that mucus-snort
hog-snicker fang-boner
burrowing through wound-black
hell-hallowed
corn-and-cotton-dead blood soil,
and through it all,

he got that look.

He got it-

that

~~Chickamauga-Chattanooga-Stones River-Shiloh-I'd-as-soon-rip-your-balls-off-and-
eat-them-for-breakfast-as-look-at-you-You-goddam-mother-fuckin'-sumbitch~~

look

in his chest-ripping heart-chewing child-devouring
eye.

That look? Yeah, he got it.

That one.

That look, Yeah.

That's the one he got.

Three Shots

First

Did it lift birds?

Bury turtles?

Launch frogs

above ponds,

splayed to embrace
their own reflections

safe from
vultures' eyes?

Did it alter the cold
march of ants,

the blind resolve
of pupae,

the wind
of butterflies?

Did a tree
shiver to tweak

an inchworm's
secret,

a fish
shift course

to mirror
the sun's forgetting?

Did time
stagger

to bend a moment
to stillness,

the bare-and-sheath
of one more dagger?

Second

Another.

Might as well.
I mean, why not?

It's not as though someone will bludgeon
you with sunlight, pull bees from flowers
to bear witness in the courtroom of your skull,
redefine "soul" to leave yours undone.

You know as well as I the flaccid dance
around theology's corpse.
You know as well as I the open door.

So shoot again! Innocence lost
is a single shot, like sin:
I'll die for you once,
then do it again, again.

Rest easy: in the soil is what's left of desire.
That's a fact of life, of death and war.
Sunlight might be sperm or decay
but even so, each day's another day,
each plowed furrow the beating of a heart.

Somewhere in light beside a pond
innocence spilled like rain
dripping from the palms of angels,
grew as a tumor flowering
the lid of my blinking eye.

Somewhere on this concrete floor
my voice shattered like coal,
mute black shards
swept with ruined hymnals
toward the backlit door.

What about you, dude?
When did you lose your voice
and bow to the ventriloquist,
telling your tale
with shot and smoke,
with the sterile innocence
of gristled blood?

Third

Outside, a garden of clover and peonies, sweat-blood,
heat-prayer and the crowing cock: third shot
prophesized by symmetry: Father and Son

demanding the Holy Ghost, yolk white and shell,
the whole damn egg. Betrayal? A serving platter.
Better yet, a verb, as in *May I betray*

that omelette for you? Betray it to the veranda,
perhaps? Christ would get it. Christ, who knows
that betrayal is an avatar of trust;

that human touch blossoms like the dogwood,
spare and cold, beautiful and superstitious;
that “Superstition” is an old Motown song;

that Motown is just another incarnation
of salvation, and like all salvation
wears itself out with every downbeat.

Christ grins, sardonic, his donkey plodding drunk
on barley, palm fronds raising their cruel jokes
from nothing but whatever’s lost in road dust,

buried in fields of anxious root, floating
from wounds to bathe the eye, to soothe the bees
dizzied by these strange rains, these dripping brows

Things I Might Have Thought in Those Moments

*I hold nothing against death: bring me autumn light and a graze
of time's cocked fist, cattail seed sailing a field, death of late summer's breath*

*the creak and cry of the cold fall cricket, eloquent in the loosening,
of each drawling moment, true to the end: I hold nothing against death.*

*Yet in the pond is a child, the face of a child, child submerged in a wash of summer
when nothing comes of nothing and nothing wins, nothing loses: lost summer:*

*I'll never hold light in the palm of my hand, never again sing the song of seed
sprout—how does it go? Who are you, we? How many dead? No one knows.*

*Rumors ghost us. I walked disembodied through the air above them, saw them in
blood
in earth, I feeling, smelling, hearing nothing: just the movement of bodies &
wounds,*

*cruel calm, the movement there like something embraced, coiled in cotton
cocoon, soundless and timeless and never to end, just as it never began:*

*boll weevil: the gunman down, the men like lovers clutched across his body: the
silence
and the overwhelming sense that all is well, all is well: we can leave now*

*as though in the lifting of two souls the rest of us left the earth, too, left our
bodies,
took a walk in the sanctuary of air that promised escape from the aftermath*

*Oh help us in the aftermath as though seed could sail blue air and take root there:
as though coming back to earth were the last thing we should do: a betrayal:*

*may you sweet and loving dead forgive me in my inability to fly to your aid,
to embrace you one last time in flesh: may all the parts of us now hidden in
shroud*

*find one bit of solace beneath the pond, in the silence, the blessed inability to
know:*

may we see it not as end but as mystery, may we reclaim mystery mystery please

It*

It is what it is.
It was just one of those things.
It came as no surprise.
It came right out of the blue.

It wouldn't have happened if we had our act together.
It's just a fact of life and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.
It's the kind of thing that makes you a better person.
It's not something to worry your pretty little head about.

It could have been a lot worse.
It just makes you stop and think.
It will drive you crazy if you think about it long enough.
It just makes you sit and wonder.

It will subtract ten years from your life if you let it.
It couldn't have happened to a nicer group of people.
It's a shame it had to happen on such a nice day.
It's a trip to the moon on gossamer wings.

It looks like a duck.
It quacks like a duck.

It ain't no pink tea party that's for sure.

It was a total mystery.
It won't amount to a hill of beans in the long run.
It screams out for an explanation.
It's bullshit, total bullshit, one-hundred percent bullshit, and by god I mean that.

It's the end all and be all of existence.
It ain't gonna bite you, for heaven's sake.
It's not as though the sun won't shine tomorrow.

It looks like a duck.
It quacks like a duck.
It's ain't no pink tea party, that's for sure.
It is a duck

*for complete poem, see appendix

Appendix: Complete Poems

Morning

At dawn's
cold blood

moon pockets
bats' flight

hides
in light

Birds cackle
crackling air,

sun mops
space

washed in dawn's
shell-

-cracked
blood

Stand and see
in the smoke of day

dawn's
veil,

a sacred
red scar

of light-pooled
loss

upon
loss

that silenced
star

that emptied
eye

It

It is what it is.
It was the one thing nobody expected.
It was over as soon as it began.
It was just one of those things.
It came as no surprise.

It's nothing to be ashamed of.
It came right out of the blue.
It was in the cards from the beginning.
It wouldn't have happened if we had our act together.
It was a total meltdown.

It just gets better with time.
It's not something to worry your pretty little head about.
It's the kind of thing that makes you a better person.
It's just a fact of life and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

It's totally without precedent.
It's not what you would expect to happen in a place like this.
It was right there in front of you all the time.
It has a kind of aura about it.
It caused everybody to get all bent out of shape.
It has more than one explanation.
It's what everybody said would happen all along.

It gets you right in the gut.
It was all part of a larger plan.
It's not the kind of thing that floats your boat.
It will haunt you for the rest of your life.
It was as plain as the nose on your face.
It's not as though anybody asked for it.

It was bound to happen sooner or later.
It makes you scratch your head in wonder.

It was what I said would happen, but does anybody ever listen to me?
It wasn't exactly written in the sky.
It's a tough nut to crack.
It sucks.
It could have been a lot worse.
It just makes you stop and think.

It grabs you by the balls and won't let go.
It will drive you crazy if you think about it long enough.
It was right there in front of you in black and white.
It's the reason we go to all this trouble.

It had disaster written all over it.
It was not what anyone imagined it would be.
It wasn't on anyone's radar screen.
It couldn't have been more obvious.
It just makes you sit and wonder.

It keeps happening over and over again.
It's nothing more and nothing less than the will of God.
It will subtract ten years from your life if you let it.
It pissed everybody off.
It don't get no worse than this.

It's the kind of thing you just can't wrap your mind around.
It wasn't as though they just walked up there and announced it or something.
It was all around us all that time and we didn't notice.
It's the end of the world as we know it.

It couldn't have happened to a nicer group of people.
It ain't over till the fat lady sings.
It's not something you can turn around and blame God for.
It doesn't have to be that way.

It's a shame it had to happen on such a nice day.
It's not the kind of thing you come to expect.
It's not like it was the end of the world or something.
It was as plain as it could be.
It screams out for an explanation.
It had a logic all its own.

It's something you don't even have to think about.
It was a total mystery.
It's everything all wrapped up together.

It's a trip to the moon on gossamer wings.
It ruined all our plans.
It looks like a duck.
It quacks like a duck.
It's no pink tea party, that's for sure.
It is a duck.

It won't amount to a goddamn hill of beans in the long run.

It just walks right up and smacks you, just like that.

It's written in the stars.

It's not like it's rocket science or something.

It ain't going to bite you for heaven's sake.

It's bullshit, total bullshit, one-hundred percent bullshit, and by god I mean that.

It's something to write home about.

It's the end-all and be-all of existence.

It won't get better any time soon.

It ain't worth the paper it's written on.

It's nothing to write home about.

It's not as though the sun won't shine tomorrow.

It ain't over till it's over.

It's all of that—and more.