

UNTITLED PRAIRIE TRILOGY

A libretto for projection, speaking, and singing by Karinne Keithley Syers

All the elements are presented here separated by type. It would be the work of the performance makers to determine how the different types of texts run alongside each other. I propose that the cycle of projections and songs are like two parallel structures, moving in and out of sync with each other, occupying different time signatures. Each cycle might loop more than once. It's an open question.

Except for the epilogue, this text is composed from reassembled sentence fragments cut out from Willa Cather's prairie novels: *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Antonia*.

for a chamber piece for two dancers and two singers
devised in collaboration with Brendan Connelly, who will be the composer

draft April 2016

There are four types of text in this score:

Text printed on paper cards

Text projected on the walls

Text to be sung

Text to be spoken.

There is also a movement layer – the carpet of the piece.

A 6-channel sound installation

A layer of pink noise

A layer of wordless singing

Each of these elements is deployed according to its own time structure, and may loop.
The entire piece lasts exactly 60 minutes.

Text to be printed

Upon entering the theater, each member of the audience is given a square white postcard with the following epigraphs printed, one on either side.

“But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes.”

“I suppose it hasn’t any form. It hasn’t any title, either.”

On their seats, the audience find a further card that reads, on front and back respectively:

“Not a country, but the material out of which countries are made.”

“Not a shed, not a corral, not a well, not even a path.”

When leaving the theater and collecting their coats, the audience is handed a final card, that reads:

“—I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, ‘Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebttest Land?’ — Do you ever feel like that, I wonder?”

Projected Text

The projected text should very gradually appear and recede over the course of the 20 minute loop. It may be projected from a slide projector, or physically written on the wall.

hunger to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness
 to leave images in the mind, hard as enamel

Let the grass grow back over
 wild soil struggle against the encroaching plow

Make a nest in the long grass
 your slow shadows in the grass

I had to look very hard to see it at all
 so deep in the grass that I could see nothing else

Trees were barely perceptible
 were only the unescapable ground in another form

They lay like pieces of glass set in dark earth
 like hands with all the work gone out of them

To enlist her imagination the pasture flooded with light
 a shining sheet of water lay at the bottom of a shallow draw

Spoken Text

Note: In the preface, Speaker A speaks underlined text. Speaker B speaks [bracketed] text. This produces minor dissonances and intervals in their unison. We hear, for example “accompanied me” and “made me despair” at the same time.

(preface for two simultaneous nearly unison voices)

The light air told me that the world ended here, and in some strange way accompanied me [made me despair]. I went over the edge of it. Lying there against [Sunning myself on] the warm bank after the cold night.

And though they grew up in the hard times, they would come down [would run down] into the shadow of the steep, shelving sides overgrown with brush, and cottonwoods and dwarf ash, magnified across the distance by the horizontal light [indescribable light].

We had been silent [walking] for a long time. No fences, no creeks or trees. There seemed to be nothing to see. The day was fading. We sat down and made a nest in the long [red] grass. Silent for a long time, nearer and nearer to the prairie floor, nothing to see.

Only the markings of glaciers. The little town behind us had vanished. Any appearance of permanence headed straight for the open prairie. The weather was the great fact.

[Let me] Go deep under the fields and [to] rest. Pull back the shaggy coat of the prairie to make me a bed. Go straight for [Red grass on] the open prairie.

The light restlessness, shabby, old and sullen, all the human effort and jealous, animal little love. They had grown up in the hard times, but in some strange way they accompanied me down into the shadow of the leaves. This succession of pictures breaks up the old wild sod. This feeling [memory].

(epilogue)

Years later, after the dim things of childhood had disappeared over the rim of the prairie, I went somewhere to write what I am saying to you now.

When I arrived, I found a small animal, dead, in the toilet.
A few days later, I found another one, living, under the sink.
And I need more coffee, so I can write.

I am trying to write, for no apparent reason other than to write,
the way a carpet keeps on carpeting this country.

I am writing in solidarity with the plain fact of the soil,
for the fact of land before its significance is ever won, or contested.

All the bewildering
coyotes
are shining sheets of water

And there you are, hiding in the long red grass.
Don't look up.
Don't look anything up.
The grass hides the fence—don't interrupt.

I have taken apart the stacks of her books
not novels
just works of the mossy imagination
taking the forms it wants to take.

“Too much detail is apt,
like any other form of extravagance,
to become slightly vulgar.”

Reading, we had a feeling for
a cluster of tones, moods that made a carpet,
a thing laying under her stories.
The great possession of the incommunicable past.
The one great possession is the incommunicable past.

blue blue-grey white black white-grey green
orange orange-yellow red-brown pitch
sand gold green white red

There goes mother, preserving everything again,
draining our accounts with her exorbitant sugar tab,
while a long slow carpet in the form of a dance—
a dance in the form of a long slow carpet—
emptying, or maybe filling, seems somehow to be running.

It seems to be running over every surface you can see,
but it's only the unescapable ground in another form.

It's only the unescapable ground in another form.

SONGS

FIRST GRASS SONG (PARTIAL)

Make a nest in the long grass
Slow shadows in the long grass
We are hidden in the long red grass

FIRST GRASS SONG

Make a nest in the long grass
Slow shadows in the long grass
We are hidden in the long red grass

Wide faint tracks in
the red of the grass
snakes and dog towns in the
shaggy bunch grass

I wanted to walk
Straight on through
the red grass
The edge of the world
Could not be far away

SECOND GRASS SONG

the life that goes on
down in the long grass
is gone

the last wild roses of the year
have opened their hearts
to die
in the long grass

the lagoons
and the red grass
the shaggy coat
the bunch grass

its inescapable
peculiar
savage kind of beauty
its uninterrupted

mournfulness
the long grass

in round, four cycles:

let the grass
grow back over
every ridge
and draw and gully

LAST GRASS SONG

the bewildering coyotes
the shining sheets of water
hidden by the long red grass

MR. SHIMERDA'S GRAVE

when all the fields
were under the fence
the road no longer ran
like a wild thing

when open grazing
days were over
the road no longer ran
like a wild thing

it followed surveyed section lines
it veered round Shimerda's grave
from the north it curved a little to the east
from the west it swung a little to the south

the unpainted grave
its unmowed grass
its sagging wire fence
like an island
of the old wild grass

the error from the surveyed lines
the clemency of soft earth roads
the error from the surveyed lines
the clemency of soft earth roads
from the north it curved a little to the east
from the west it swung a little to the south

the unpainted grave
its unmowed grass
its sagging wire fence
it was an island
of the old wild grass

PANTHER CANYON

hardness
grows alone
thinks alone
grows alone // thinks alone

hardness
grows alone
thinks alone
grows alone // thinks alone

yellow rocks
bake in sunlight
arrow-shaped birds
swim all day
throw the lumber away

the things
that are really yours
will separate
from the rest

things that are really yours
separate themselves
from the rest

SPRING, SUMMER, AUTUMN, WINTER

out in the stream
the sandbars glitter
strong and young and wild

(instrumental)

the burning sun
secures the corn

(instrumental)

bright and shadowless
blue of autumn

(instrumental)

ground so frozen
it bruises the feet
to walk in the roads