

Azrael (2010)

Song for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano

Duration: 4'30"

Commissioned by Jay Barksdale

World Premiere: Beth Wladis, soprano, Jay Barksdale, piano; Dorot House, NYC, October 23, 2011

UK Premiere: Julia Simpson, soprano, Richard Hall, piano; Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, June 30, 2012

In early 2010 my friend Jay Barksdale mailed me a book. Jay sang for me in my old chamber chorus, Howl!, in which he also sang much of my music. The book was the Collected Poems of Sylvia Townsend Warner. Jay's accompanying note asked whether I would consider a song commission if I came across a poem I liked. The commission would be in honor of the 10th anniversary of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society. I had never heard of Warner, an English writer who lived from 1893-1978. I was quite intrigued with much of her writing, especially her later books of poetry, from which *Azrael* is taken. It is an intensely melancholy text, full of intimate images of loneliness, resignation, and recognition of mortality. My setting is fairly elaborate, in the continuing variation form I have been drawn to in my recent works.

Who chooses the music, turns the page,
Waters the geraniums on the window-ledge?
Who proxies my hand,
Puts on the morning-ring in lieu of the diamond?

Who winds the trudging clock, who tears
Flimsy the empty date off calendars?
Who widow-hoods my senses
Lest they should meet the morning's cheat defenceless?

Who valets me at nightfall, undresses me of another day,
Puts it tidily and finally away?
And lets in darkness
To befriend my eyelids like an illusory caress?

I called him Sorrow when first he came,
But Sorrow is too narrow a name;
And though he has attended me all this long while
Habit will not do. Habit is servile.
He, inaudible, governs my days, impalpable,
Impels my hither and thither. I am his to command,
My times are in his hand.
Once in a dream I called him Azrael.

--Sylvia Townsend Warner