Jessica Rudman

A Forest that is a Desert

for a Cappella SATB Choir

Text by Kendra Preston Leonard

2019 ca. 11:00-12:00

A Forest that is a Desert

a Cappella SATB Choir

I. In the Stony Mountains (3:30)
II. Shadow Reel to Last Breath (2:30)
III. Hospice (ca. 5:00-6:00)

Program Notes

A Forest that is a Desert was commissioned by Choral Arts Initiative for the 2019 PREMIERE | Project Festival. The work sets three texts written by Kendra Preston Leonard specifically for this composition.

When I first received the CAI commission, I looked through a number of Kendra's text and was drawn to her lovely work "My mother is a poem by Yeats," which expresses the profound grief of watching a loved one succumb to dementia. Full of ideas, I texted to ask if she would be open to me setting it. She was thrilled - but another composer already had secured the rights to set the poem!

I resigned myself to choosing another text, but couldn't get the first poem of my head enough to find something that resonated strongly. After some brainstorming, Kendra generously agreed to write a companion text exploring similar themes. Within a couple days, she sent three new poems written in memory of her mother, hoping that one might be a good fit. I loved all three and was particularly drawn to them as a set.

The resulting work, A Forest that is a Desert, uses traditional choral writing, coloristic vocal effects, and indeterminacy to bring to life Kendra's evocative words. The music is intended to reflect the mental effects of dementia on those who suffer from it and also express the complex emotions felt by loved ones watching that decline.

Performance Notes

General:

- The work can be performed in full, or any individual movement or pair of movements may be performed.
- Glissandos should take the full value of the note on which they are placed.
- Grace notes should be performed on the beat.
- Solos for a voice type that occur in different places of the piece may be performed by different singers or by the same singer.

I:

- The whispered gibberish should create the effect of garbled speech without recognizable words.
- The whispered names should create a jumble of sound with recognizable words sometimes
 coming out of the texture. Singers may need to voice these more to allow names to be clearly
 heard.

III:

- The third movement ends with an ostinato (mm. 48-51) that repeats while singers move one by one to a Recessional, which they sing while departing the stage.
- The departures starting after the first repetition of measures 48-51 should not feel like a coordinated mass exit but rather a trickle that builds over time.
- Singers should leave one at a time and may leave at any place in the ostinato. They do not need to leave at the repeat sign.
- Singers should leave in such way that the sections on stage are relatively balanced for as long as
 possible. In other words, one voice type should not all leave first, followed by another, and
 another.
- A suggested plan of departure based on a 24-member choir is:
 - First two times through: all sing mm. 48-51 on stage
 - Third time: one singer starts to walk away
 - Fourth time: two singers of different voice types start to walk away
 - Fifth time: four singers (one from each voice type) start to walk away
 - Sixth time: eight singers (two from each voice type) start to walk away
 - Seventh time: all remaining singers start to walk away, except for one alto
- As singers leave, they may choose to look back at the singers around them, take and then release
 the hand of the person next to them, or otherwise use physical gestures and facial expressions to
 convey emotion at their departure.
- Singers should walk around or through the audience, and if possible, each should take a different path from the person(s) exiting just before them.
- Singers should fully exit the hall or stand quietly behind the audience until the end of the piece.

Composer Contact Information

Jessica Rudman

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Text

1. In the Stony Mountains (excerpt)*

[I turn her chair and she turns to me and she is looking so very far away; her eyes sweep the room and come about to land on me and she says

Oh-

oh, I am having the most terrible hallucination

and] I think she has lost me forever, amid names and faces and trees

so much is lost in a forest that is desert

my hand circles on her back, all spine, stony mountains and I tell her I tell her that I'm real and she says

how how can you be here?

I flew, I tell her: I flew here to see you.

But how can that be? It just is; I am here.

* Bracketed text not set

2. Shadow Reel to Last Breath

There is no revelation in her vexed words, lost sleep, the catch in her throat.

Shadows reel about the room where a lamp is always on, a little sun.

We turn her body, turn her sheets, take turns around her bed. We walk, with anarchy and darkness on the clock, an arc.

Rock, and step, and circle.

Listen, listen, her speech is rough and loose. We keep our tears silent and our gazes blank.

The hour comes round at last.

3. Hospice

Hear the willow sweep away the leaves that fall on the brick, and fix the light by the wardrobe where the old shade riddles it round.

One breath in and one breath out while the second hand sweeps in silence; her hands trace circles in the air and on the counterpane.

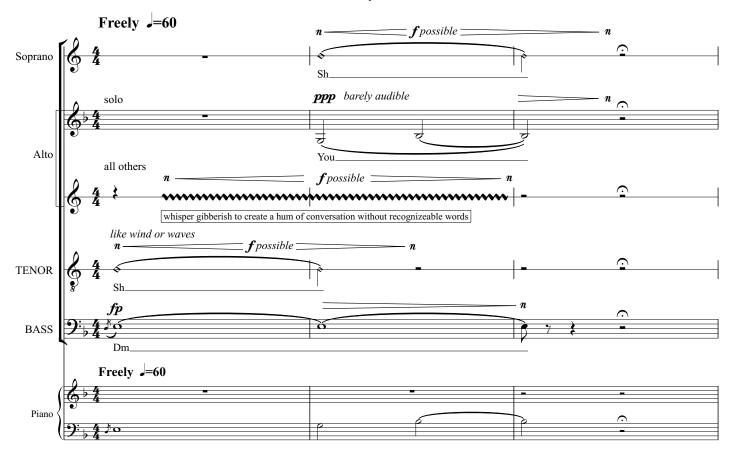
Hold my hand, you won't get lost. The moon circles the earth, and the tide comes in and out, sweeping clear the beach; the waves arc and recede.

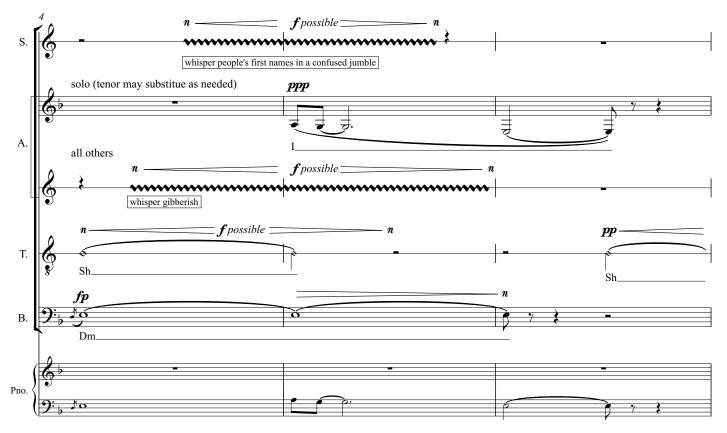
A Forest that is a Desert

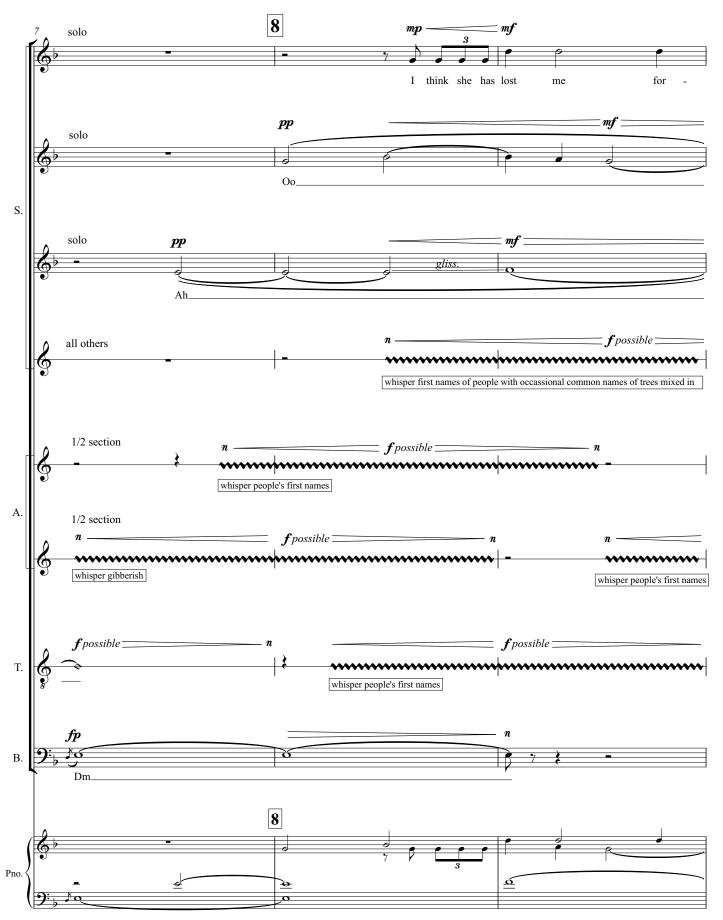
Kendra Preston Leonard

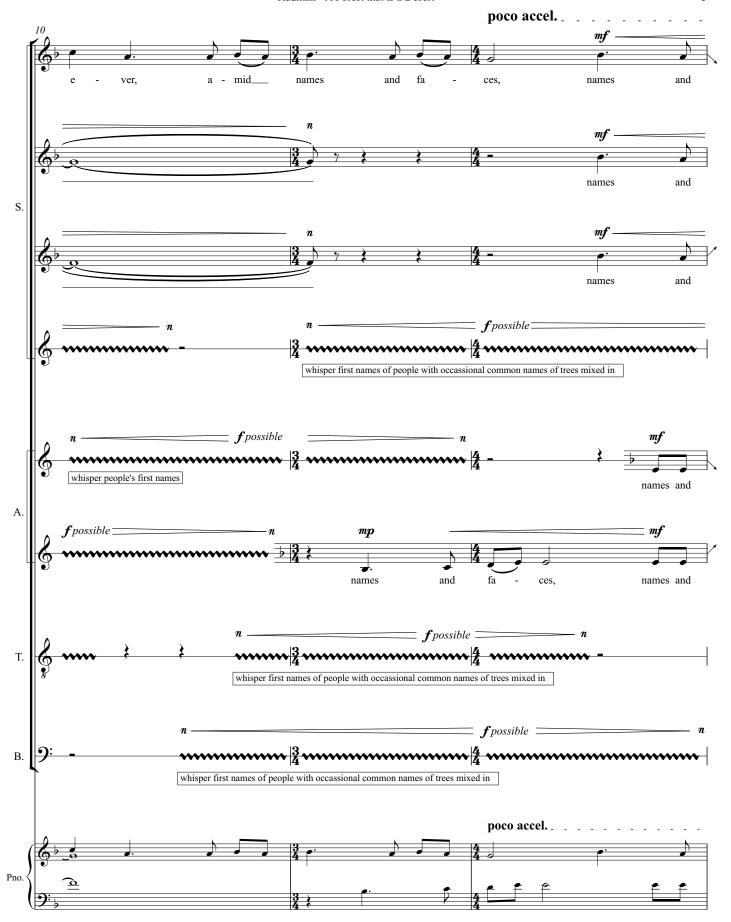
I. In the Stony Mountains

Jessica Rudman (b. 1982)

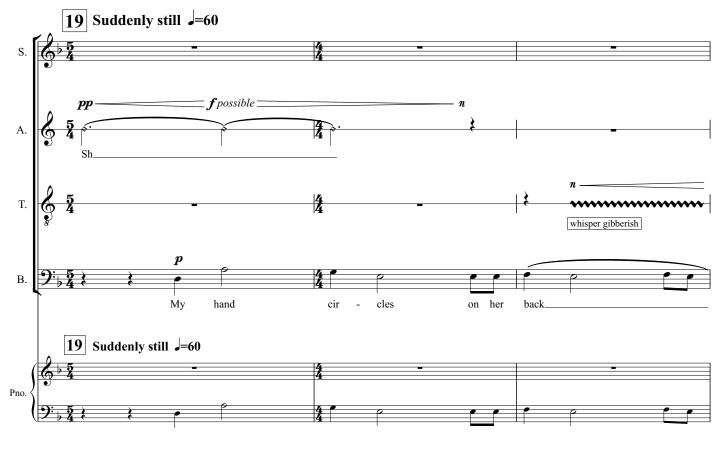


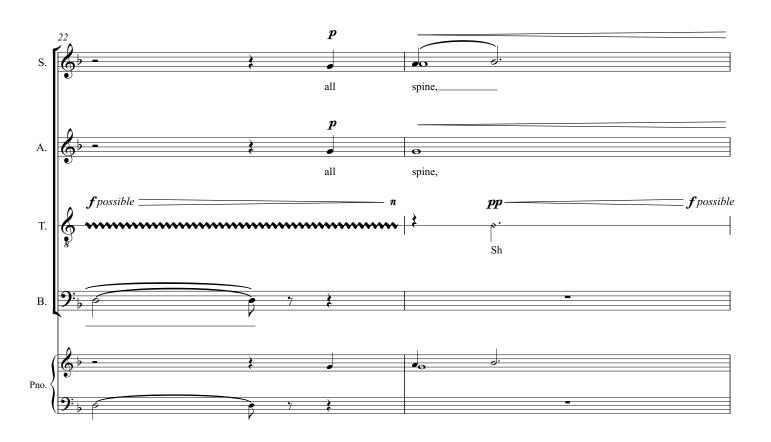








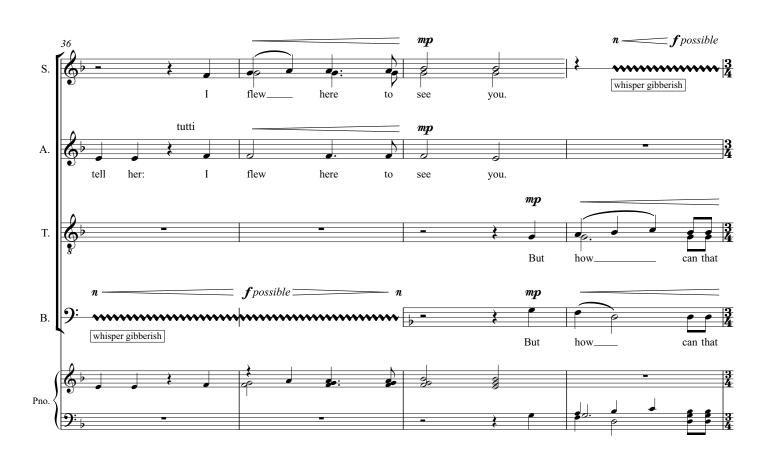


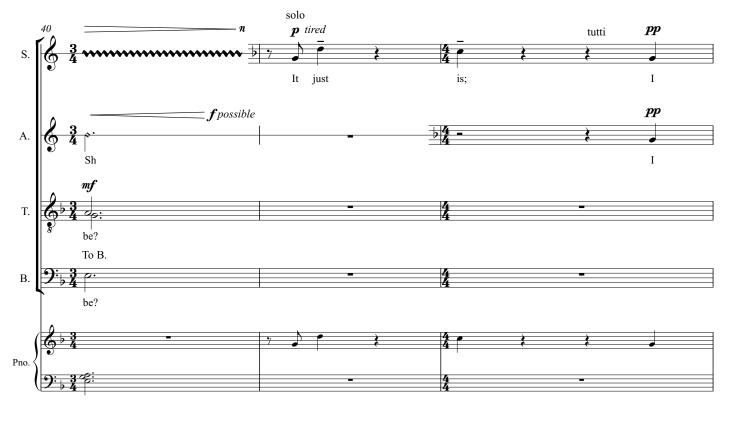


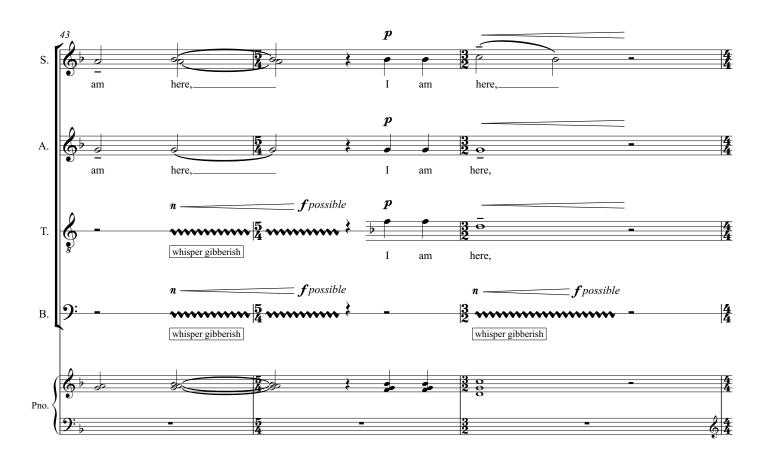














II. Shadow Reel to Last Breath







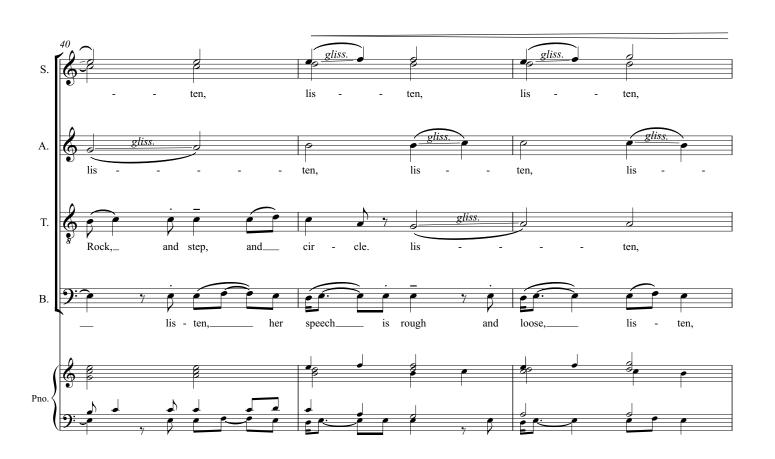


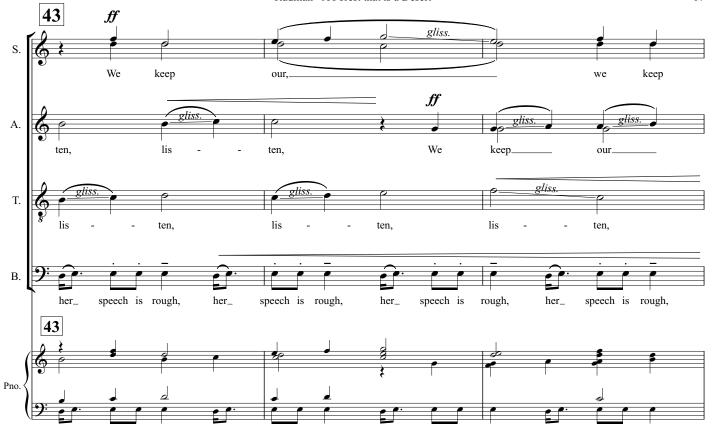


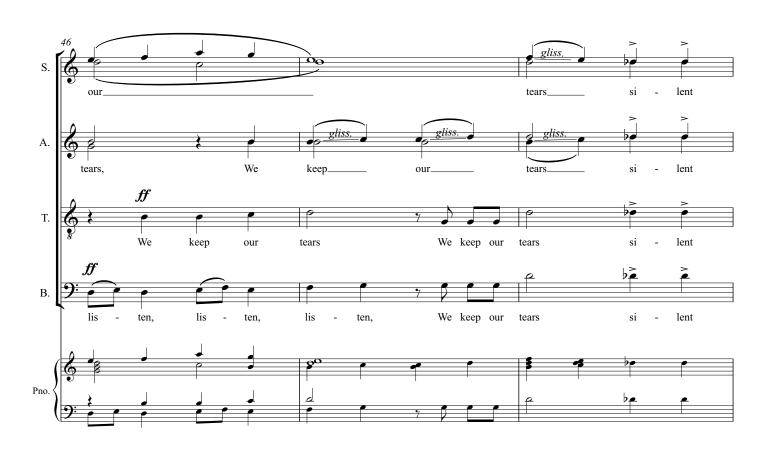




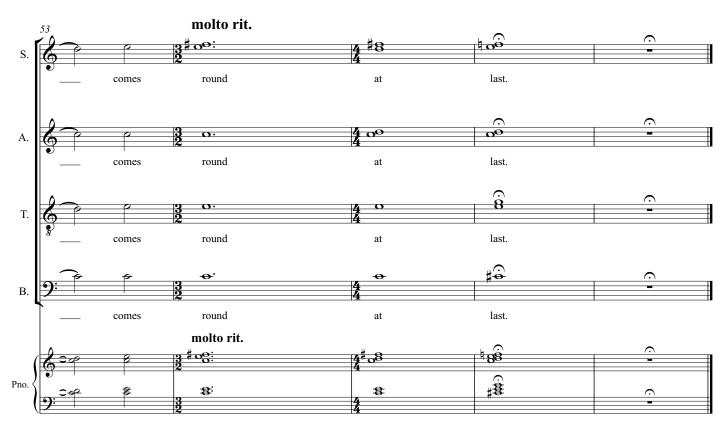






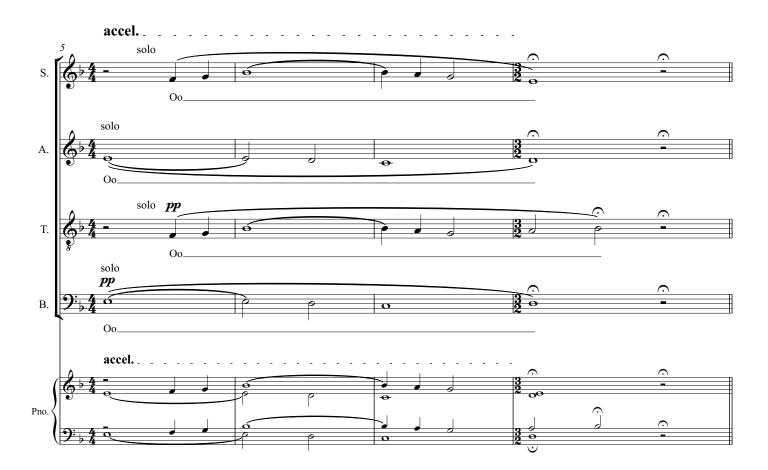






III. Hospice

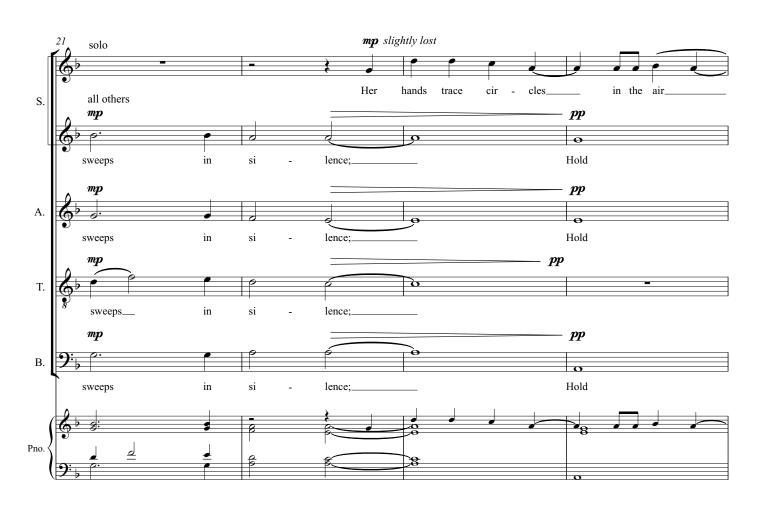






















Continue to repeat the measures above. After the first time through, performers should begin slowly exiting the stage one by one as described in the performance notes. When a person starts to leave, they should sing the Recessional below.

Eventually all singers except for one alto should leave the stage and sing the Recessional.

Once all other singers have begun to walk away, the remaining alto repeats mm. 48-51 (ad lib. as desired) until everyone has finished the Recessional. Then, the alto soloist should sing mm. 48-51 one final time as written, slowing down and getting softer.

Recessional

Sing 2-4 of the following phrases with the lyrics. Then sing 2-4 on "ah" or "oo." Finally, hum 2 or more as needed to finish exiting. Always pause between each phrase.

Start in time with the music repeated above and sing the phrases as written. As you proceed, get increasingly out of sync with the ensemble either by becoming shifted off from their meter/pulse or by slowing down. You may also start to vary and fragment the melodies as you get further from the stage.

Each singer will sing the Recessional at their own time and in their own way. The phrases should be sung in varied orders and repeated as desired. They should be sung in any comfortable octave.

