

# Quiet Poems

for tenor and piano

Duration: 17 minutes

At the height of the pandemic, my friend and close collaborator Nilo Cruz, embarked on a very personal project. Inspired by the work we had done on our oratorio *Dreamers*, Nilo expanded some of those poems and kept reflecting around a few of the issues that we had addressed, in particular how many children whose stories are not being told suffer in captivity on a daily basis. When I visited him in Miami in the fall of 2021, he showed me those poems in confidence, and I was profoundly moved. The original collection consists of more than 30 poems on a variety of topics, so I decided to focus on four which, together, build a beautiful arch.

*The Orchid Boy*, places poetic beauty and clinical rigor side to side, creating a stark contrast between the fragility of a child and the merciless treatment that he is being subjected to by his captors. *Tango for a Rapist*, with its dark and graphic title, compels us to witness the testimony of a girl who has fallen victim to one of the most atrocious acts that a human being can be capable of. Word by word, she walks us through her ordeal, exposing her pain and laying bare her emotional scars. In *Lullaby for the Insomniac Child*, we are given a window into the solitude of a child who, in spite of the harsh conditions under which she is kept prisoner, manages to find comfort in the sounds of nature at night. *The Girl of the Clouds* tells us about a girl's yearning for life beyond captivity. Through her imagination, she is able to transport herself beyond the walls that keep her prisoner, finding solace and beauty in the limitless possibilities that exist within her own mind.

Writing these songs has been incredibly rewarding but also emotionally taxing. During the whole creative process, I held on to Nilo's powerful words, motivated by a desire to tell the stories of those who are most fragile and helpless, and whose voices don't tend to be heard. Also crucial from a musical standpoint, were Michael Fabiano's superlative artistry and vocal prowess, which inspired me all along the way. Commissioned by the Tucson Desert Song Festival, with the help of funds provided in part by the MAP Fund, this song cycle is scheduled to be premiered in Tucson, Arizona in February of 2024.

*Quiet Poems* is dedicated to all the children who suffer quietly in captivity. May their voices be heard.

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**I. The Orchid Boy**

An orchid has flowered  
from a boy's ear.

It happened overnight,  
as if he were to listen to God.

The flower has blossomed  
with a color unknown.

We puzzle over its petals,  
over its fragrance, over its strength.

We fear that soon  
he will turn into a garden.

For the time being,  
we have placed him in insolation.

Per the forest patrol, this is a case  
of an otherworldly flower.

A botanist suggests keeping the boy  
away from the light.

A climatologist prescribes  
to put an end to his summer.

The question is: has it blossomed willingly?  
Is it here to take the child back to the trees?

Today we have called a gardener  
because the flower is more aromatic than ever.

We wonder whether to cut this hybrid  
of heavenly color and earthly perfume.

We fear for the other children  
who may develop this orchid disorder.

## II. Tango for a Rapist

After you raped me, my deflowerer,  
I wanted to iron a hyacinth,  
but you were not done with me yet.

You made me sweep the torn petals,  
like a barber sweeps the cut  
and useless hair off the floor.

You made sure I closed the window  
so no aroma would travel beyond  
the gathered petals in the pail,  
because you were not done with me yet.

You made sure that no pistils  
or anthers were left behind  
of the destruction of your artillery.

You made sure to sweat your dominion  
over me once again, and mark your territory with urine,  
and draw the silhouette of your crime with gunpowder.  
But you were not done with me yet.

You uprooted me from the crack  
of cement where I daringly forced  
my way through to pierce the light,  
with a bud of green faith.

I risked writing for help  
with the dust from a wing of a moth.  
That's when you handcuffed  
the trees all around me,  
so they would not come to my rescue.

You branded your initials  
on my torso with the stinger of a wasp.  
You stored and sliced  
my tears, my rage, and sorrow in jars,  
and spread them on your bread  
to feed your ravenous hunger.

And when your flame  
retreated with the ash of my skin,  
you returned to test  
the air in my lungs  
and threatened to fasten  
my eyelids with pins, because  
you had to play some  
more with your prey.

You sat me on your lap  
as if I were a guitar  
and you plucked my hair  
to create music  
that could fill  
your desolate void.

Yes, my cursed one,  
you were delicate  
when you tried  
to play me.  
I was the one who could not  
find music in the tangled strings  
of my shattered wood.

But you were not done with me yet.

### **III. Lullaby for the Insomniac Child**

At  
night,  
bit by bit,  
breath by breath  
she hums the sounds  
of leaves, the songs of  
crickets, among the whistling  
of the wind and the aria of the moon.  
She sings her motherless lullaby, despite  
the shadows of the guards with metal hearts.  
Despite the forty locks, the cameras that detect  
the movement of her mouth, the opening and closing of her eyelids,  
as they blink over the dilation of the pupils, fighting the demons of her sleep.

### **IV. The Girl of the Clouds**

She opens the pillowcase  
as if she were lifting a wave  
that holds a secret.

She opens the cloth again  
to see if the white is still there.  
White. Whiter than foam.

In the whiteness,  
subtle whispers of smoke,  
from her hidden cloud,

which she stole from the sky,  
when the guards  
weren't looking.

At night she feeds the cloud  
her tears, blood from a cut,  
and the sweat from her nightshirt.

She wishes for it to grow  
with the strength of a hurricane  
that will break open her cage.

She wants it to fly  
with the force of a comet  
that will take her away from that place,

far beyond the thorn fence,  
beyond the walls,  
the cement,

beyond bridges,  
and checkpoints,  
and the guards

that have cut up her wings  
and locked up  
her traveling shoes.

It suddenly moves.  
Quickly. Renounces to be a secret  
in her pillowcase, anymore.

It wants to fly.  
Defy gravity. Learn from the wind.  
It slips out. Swiftly.

It is circling the girl. Sheer.  
Transparent. Diaphanous.  
Transforming before her sight.

That's when she knows she can settle  
with just being dissolved and disappear  
in the translucency of the cloud.

Tomorrow she will feed it mist.  
Tomorrow she will feed it fog,  
gossamer, feathers if she can find some,  
and more unattainable purity.