

AVANTI CHAMBER SINGERS PRESENTS

# CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD



**CRAIG HELLA JOHNSON**

*COMMISSIONED BY FRAN AND LARRY COLLMANN  
AND CONSPIRARE  
DEDICATED TO PHILIP OVERBAUGH*

**APRIL 22 & APRIL 23, 2023**  
RECITAL HALL, FIRSTONTARIO PAC  
250 ST PAUL ST., ST. CATHARINES

**RACHEL RENSINK-HOFF**  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
**LESLEY KINGHAM**  
PIANIST



**Matthew  
Shepard  
Foundation**  
Erasing Hate since 1998

April 15, 2023

To the cast and crew of Avanti Chamber Singers of Niagara,

On behalf of myself, Dennis and the staff of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, I want to thank you for taking on the task of performing *Considering Matthew Shepard*. The three-part fusion oratorio, which has been performed across the country, shares the life and legacy of our son Matt through a variety of musical styles seamlessly woven into one unified voice.

Composer Craig Hella Johnson's blending of poetry, newspaper reports, interviews, and passages from Matt's personal journal creates a powerful experience, making *Considering Matthew Shepard* a significant artistic expression of Matt's story. Today, you become an integral part of that story and Matt's legacy to foster a more caring and just world.

*Considering Matthew Shepard*, with its powerful messages, unfortunately, continues to be relevant today, as hatred and division cloud our efforts towards equality. Yet, it is your courage to engage in what can be an emotional and sometimes life-changing process that helps sustain my optimism and ignite my eagerness to continue in this critical advocacy work.

Once again, we thank you for your participation in a production that often raises so many personal feelings. We encourage you to use this opportunity to inspire conversation on how to create change and challenge your community to identify and address hate that lives within your schools, neighborhoods, and homes.

We applaud and appreciate your efforts.

Best Wishes,

Judy Shepard  
Co-Founder and President, Matthew Shepard Foundation

## Composer's Note

Like so many people, I was deeply moved and affected by the death of a young Wyoming man in 1998, Matthew Wayne Shepard. The events surrounding his death created an enormous feeling-world in me which continued to reverberate for months and years after the event. I felt such a strong desire to respond somehow, especially musically.

As a choral musician, I am very connected to the Passion settings, especially those of J.S. Bach. At first I felt called to compose a Passion setting of Matthew Shepard. I followed that instinct and created Passion music which now makes up some of the central section of this work. I then expanded the oratorio to include a prologue and an epilogue. I very much wanted Matt's voice to be heard, even in a small way, and to include a few musical snapshots of his strong life force. Additionally, I also especially wanted to provide a space for reflection, consideration and unity within this musical framework.

For the formation of the libretto, I chose to gather and shape a collection of texts from several writers whose words span centuries and represent significant cultural and geographic differences. Their writings both contribute to the telling of the story and also help create the poetic and musical structure which holds this musical meditation and reflection.

I am indebted to Lesléa Newman for the poems from her extraordinary collection *October Mourning*, which created the inspiration and foundational structure for the Passion music. My collaboration with Michael Dennis Browne was deeply meaningful. He worked closely with me, writing several texts and bringing his wisdom and refreshing inspiration to the shaping of this work. Other poetic voices woven into the texture include the German mystic Hildegard von Bingen, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, Persian mystic Hafiz (rendered by Daniel Ladinsky), W. S. Merwin and several others whose words were building blocks within certain texts, including William Blake, Rumi, Dante, and a passage from the Old Testament.

Because the American West is so important to the telling of this story and our consideration of it, I include two Wyoming poets, John Nesbitt and Sue Wallis. For me, the expression of contrasting intimacy and grandeur along with contrasting images of both the enduring and the ephemeral evoked in Sue Wallis' *Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass* creates a space in which all of the other texts can dwell. For some of the sections, I created texts myself.

The singers of *Conspirare* inspired me at every turn. Their voices were in my imagination as I composed *Considering Matthew Shepard* and they brought it into being with tender devotion.

I am deeply grateful to Dennis and Judy Shepard for their incredible generosity in continuing to support the many remembrances of their beloved son Matt, and for being such extraordinary warriors for love in the world.

– Craig Hella Johnson

*Craig Hella Johnson is the Founding Artistic Director of Conspirare, a Grammy®-winning professional choir based in Austin, Texas. He is one of today's most influential voices in choral music, active as a conductor, composer, arranger and educator. Considering Matthew Shepard was premiered in 2016 by Conspirare and has since been performed by choirs across the world.*

**CENTRAL IMAGES in *Considering Matthew Shepard***



**Fence** – personified as a loving, observing witness to the events surrounding the death of Matthew Shepard



**Evergreen** – the protection and provision of the natural world; it is what sustains and renews us



**Fire** – set by The Ancient Heart, fire converts anger to action, indifference to concern, hatred to love



**Light** – the antidote to darkness that dwells in each one of us, whether seen or unseen



Named Promising New Adult Ensemble in the 2019 Choral Canada National Competition for Canadian Amateur Choirs, the Avanti Chamber Singers was founded in 2006 by Dr. Harris Loewen. As a community-based chamber choir, Avanti's mission is to achieve a high level of artistic performance in the presentation of a wide variety of choral music from the Renaissance to the present, with an emphasis on the works of living composers. Avanti has performed in several Niagara communities and collaborated with a variety of guest artists, including the Niagara Symphony Orchestra, Chorus Niagara, Harmonia Chamber Singers, Brock University choirs, Music Niagara, Charles Bruffy, Jace Kaholokula Saplan and Kenny Rogers.

Avanti supports young musicians through its Choral Mentorship Program, where singers between the ages of 18 and 24 build their vocal skills and expand their musical knowledge through active participation in Avanti. These singers are coached by Avanti member and Brock University Voice Instructor Leanne Vida.

The Avanti Chamber Singers is a registered charity and not-for-profit corporation governed by an elected Board of Directors: Janice Slade (President), Tim Stacey (Vice-President), Scott Vernon (Secretary), Janice Coles (Treasurer), Molly Krips, Terry Mactaggart, Paul Miller, Brody Smith and Leanne Vida.

We welcome donations, and tax receipts will be issued for all contributions. Go to [avantisingers.com/donate](https://avantisingers.com/donate) for more information or scan the QR code to donate online through our Zeffy account.





*Soprano:* Karlie Boyle, Carol Dohn, Pat Hartman, Julia Hooker, Beth Miller, Colleen Morningstar, Victoria Rawlins, Abigail Shatford\*, Natalie Watson

*Alto:* Janice Coles, Mackenna Friesen\*, Shelley Griffin, Molly Krips, Karen Orlandi, Lori Reimer-Wiebe, Annie Slade, Janice Slade, Emily Taub, Leanne Vida

*Tenor:* Casey Heemsker, Aron Hoff, Robert Rawlins, Tim Stacey, Scott Vernon

*Bass:* Lee Bakker\*, Fraser Krips, Paul Miller, Jim Reynolds, Stephen A.C. Shinn, Tim Slade, Brody Smith, Paul Wiebe

\*Choral Mentorship Program participant



### **Instrumentalists**

Vera Sherwood, violin  
Vanessa Hellinga, viola  
Kirk Starkey, cello  
Peter Pavlovsky, bass

Kaye Royer, clarinet  
Richard Burrows, percussion  
Timothy Phelan, guitars  
Lesley Kingham, piano

**Dr. Rachel Rensink-Hoff** is Associate Professor of Music at the Brock University Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine & Performing Arts, Conductor of the Brock University Choir and Sora Singers, and Artistic Director of the Avanti Chamber Singers. She is also founder of the Niagara Choral Workshop summer program for choral leaders. Prior to her appointment at Brock University, she spent eight years on faculty at McMaster University. Rachel is the 2014 laureate of the Leslie Bell Prize for Choral Conducting from the Ontario Arts Council, and choirs under her direction have been the recipients of numerous honours and awards. Rachel has published numerous articles on choral pedagogy and repertoire and presents regularly at national and international conferences. Her ongoing work focuses on conductor training and mentorship, singing and wellbeing, and the conductor's creative processes in rehearsal and programming. Past Vice-President of Programs & Services for Choral Canada and Past-President of Choirs Ontario, Rachel enjoys an active career as conductor, adjudicator, juror, and workshop clinician across Canada and was recently honoured with the Arts In Education Award from the City of St. Catharines. In April she led the Alberta Youth Choir and this summer will conduct the Ontario Youth Choir.

**Lesley Kingham** graduated with a Masters in Pipe Organ Performance and Literature from the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana in 1996, studying under Dr. Craig Cramer. Throughout the program she served as the liturgical assistant at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. She received her Bachelor of Music from the University of Western Ontario in 1994, at which time she was awarded the gold medal for pipe organ performance. During her studies Ms. Kingham was the assistant organist at St. James Westminster Anglican Church and the accompanist for the Amabile Boys' Choirs. She was the staff accompanist and keyboard harmony instructor at Brock University for many years and is currently the organ instructor at the university in addition to being the accompanist for the Avanti Chamber Singers. Lesley is the organist and music director at St. Thomas' Anglican Church and operates a private teaching studio.

## CONCERT PROGRAM

### PROLOGUE

- Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass *Tim Stacey, soloist*  
Ordinary Boy *Leanne Vida, Janice Coles, Robert Rawlins & Julia Hooker, soloists*  
We Tell Each Other Stories *Victoria Rawlins, soloist*

### PASSION

- Recitation I *Annie Slade, reader*  
The Fence (before) *Tim Stacey, soloist*  
Recitation II *Paul Miller, reader*  
The Fence (that night) *Stephen A.C. Shinn, soloist*  
Recitation III *Lori Reimer-Wiebe & Paul Wiebe, readers*  
A Protestor  
Keep It Away from Me *Emily Taub, soloist; Trio: Julia Hooker, Colleen Morningstar & Beth Miller*  
Recitation IV *Carol Dohn, reader*  
Fire of the Ancient Heart *Stephen A.C. Shinn, soloist*  
Recitation V *Jim Reynolds, reader*  
Stray Birds  
We Are All Sons  
I Am Like You *Quartet: Abigail Shatford, Mackenna Friesen, Tim Stacey & Lee Bakker*  
The Innocence *Robert Rawlins, soloist*  
Recitation VI *Karen Orlandi, reader*  
The Fence (one week later) *Leanne Vida, soloist*  
Recitation VII *Lee Bakker, reader*  
Stars *Tim Slade, reader*  
Recitation VIII *Aron Hoff, reader*  
In Need of Breath *Robert Rawlins, soloist*  
Recitation IX *Abigail Shatford, reader*  
Deer Song *Natalie Watson, soloist, with Victoria Rawlins & Carol Dohn*  
Recitation X *Aron Hoff, reader*

### EPILOGUE

- Meet Me Here *Karlie Boyle, soloist*  
All of Us *Trio: Leanne Vida, Karlie Boyle & Emily Taub*  
Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass *Tim Stacey, soloist*



# Libretto

## PROLOGUE

All.

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,  
Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

### **Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass**

Cattle, horses, sky and grass  
These are the things that sway and pass  
Before our eyes and through our dreams  
Through shiny, sparkly, golden gleams  
Within our psyche that find and know  
The value of this special glow  
That only gleams for those who bleed  
Their soul and heart and utter need  
Into the mighty, throbbing Earth  
From which springs life and death and birth.

*I'm alive! I'm alive, I'm alive, golden. I'm alive! I'm alive, I'm alive . . .*

These cattle, horses, grass, and sky  
Dance and dance and never die  
They circle through the realms of air  
And ground and empty spaces where  
A human being can join the song  
Can circle, too, and not go wrong  
Amidst the natural, pulsing forces  
Of sky and grass and cows and horses.

*I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .*

This chant of life cannot be heard  
It must be felt, there is no word  
To sing that could express the true  
Significance of how we wind  
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind  
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass  
And all these things that sway and pass.

## Ordinary Boy

Let's talk about Matt—

*Ordinary boy, ordinary boy, ordinary boy . . .*

Born in December in Casper, Wyoming

*Ordinary boy*

to a father, Dennis  
and a mother, Judy

*Ordinary boy, ordinary boy*

Then came a younger brother, Logan

*Ordinary boy*

His name was Matthew Wayne Shepard. And one day his name  
came to be known around the world. But as his mother said:

**Judy Shepard:** You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt.

He went camping, he went fishing, even hunting for a moose  
He read plays and he read stories and especially *Dr. Seuss*

He wrote poems with illustrations for the neighbors on the street  
And he left them in each mailbox till he learned it was illegal

He made friends and he wore braces and his frame was rather small  
He sang songs his father taught him

*Frere Jacques . . .*

*Row Row Row Your Boat . . .*

*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star . . .*

**Judy:** He was my son, my first-born, and more. He was my friend, my  
confidant, my constant reminder of how good life can be—and . . . how  
hurtful.

How good life can be, how good life can be

**Judy:** *Matt's laugh, his wonderful hugs, his stories . . .*

Matt writes about himself in a notebook:

I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest.

I am not a pest, I am not a pest . . .

I am my own person. I am warm.

I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

I love Wyoming . . .

I love Wyoming very much . . .

I love theatre, I love good friends  
I love succeeding, I love pasta  
I love jogging, I love walking and feeling good

I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy

I love movies and eating and positive people and pasta and driving and walking and jogging and kissing and learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and being myself

I love theatre! I love theatre!

And I love to be on stage! [1]

Such an ordinary boy living ordinary days  
In an ordinary life so worth living  
He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears  
With an ordinary hope for belonging

He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears  
With an ordinary hope for belonging

*(Born to live this ordinary life)*

Just an ordinary boy living ordinary days with extraordinary kindness  
extraordinary laughter extraordinary shining  
extraordinary light and joy  
Joy and light.

I love, I love, I love . . .

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

## **We Tell Each Other Stories**

We tell each other stories so that we will remember  
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days

Always telling stories, wanting to remember  
Where and whom we came from  
Who we are

Sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember  
One that breaks the heart of us all  
Still we tell the story  
We're listening and confessing  
What we have forgotten  
In the story of us all

We tell each other stories so that we will remember  
Trying to find the meaning . . .

*I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy  
Who never had expected his life would be this story,  
(could be any boy)*

*I am open to hear a story*

*Open, listen.  
All.*

# PASSION

## **RECITATION I**

*Laramie, southeastern Wyoming, between the Snowy Range and the Laramie Range. Tuesday, October 6, 1998.*

### **The Fence (before)**

Out and alone  
on the endless empty prairie

the moon bathes me  
the stars bless me

the sun warms me  
the wind soothes me

still still still  
I wonder

will I always be out here  
exposed and alone?

will I ever know why  
I was put (here) on this earth?

will somebody someday  
stumble upon me?

will anyone remember me  
after I'm gone?

*Still, still, still . . . I wonder.*

## **RECITATION II**

*Tuesday night. Matthew attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, then joined others for coffee at the College Inn. Around 10:30, he went to the Fireside Bar, where he later met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Near midnight, they drove him to a remote area, tied him to a buck and rail fence, beat him horribly and left him to die in the cold of night.*

## **The Fence (that night)**

*Most noble evergreen with your roots in the sun:  
you shine in the cloudless sky of a sphere no earthly eminence can grasp,  
You blush like the dawn,  
you burn like a flame of the sun.*

I held him all night long  
He was heavy as a broken heart  
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes  
He was dead weight yet he kept breathing

He was heavy as a broken heart  
His own heart wouldn't stop beating  
The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing  
His face streaked with moonlight and blood  
I tightened my grip and held on

The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing  
We were out on the prairie alone  
I tightened my grip and held on  
I saw what was done to this child

We were out on the prairie alone  
Their truck was the last thing he saw  
I saw what was done to this child  
I cradled him just like a mother

*Most noble evergreen, most noble evergreen, your roots in the sun . . .*

Their truck was the last thing he saw  
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes  
I cradled him just like a mother  
I held him all night long

*Most noble evergreen . . .*

### **RECITATION III**

***The next morning, Matthew was found by a cyclist, a fellow student, who at first thought he was a scarecrow. After several days in a coma and on life support, Matthew Shepard died on Monday, October 12, at 12:53 a.m. At the funeral, which took place on Friday, October 16, at St Mark's Episcopal Church in Casper, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside.***

## **A Protestor**

*God Hates Fags, Matt in Hell*

–Signs held by anti-gay protestors at Matthew Shepard's funeral and the trials of his murderers

*kreuzige, kreuzige!*                      *(translation: crucify, crucify)*

A boy who takes a boy to bed?  
Where I come from that's not polite  
He asked for it, you got that right  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red  
The only good fag is a fag that's dead

A man and a woman, the Good Lord said  
As sure as Eve took that first bite  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

*kreuzige, kreuzige!*

Beneath the Hunter's Moon he bled  
That must have been a pretty sight  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

C'mon, kids, it's time for bed  
Say your prayers, kiss Dad good night  
A boy who takes a boy to bed?  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

*crucify, crucify . . . the light*

*crucify the light . . .*

## **Keep It Away From Me (The Wound of Love)**

don't wanna look on this  
never get near  
flames too raw for me  
grief too deep  
keep it away from me  
    *stay out of my heart*  
    *stay out of my hope*  
some son, somebody's pain  
some child gone  
child never mine  
born to this trouble  
don't wanna be born to this world  
world where sometimes yes  
world where mostly no  
    *the wound of love*

smoke round my throat  
rain down my soul  
no heaven lies  
keep them gone  
keep them never  
grief too deep, flames too raw  
keep them away from me  
    *stay out of my heart*  
    *stay out of my hope*  
don't try  
any old story on me  
no wing no song  
no cry no comfort ye  
no wound ever mine  
close up the gates of night  
    *the wound of love*  
keep this all away from me  
    *the wound of love*  
    *you take away*  
    *the wounds of the world*  
keep it away from me



## **RECITATION IV**

***National media began to broadcast the story. As the news began to spread, many people across the country gathered together in candlelight vigils, moved to (silently) speak for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness.***

### **Fire of the Ancient Heart**

*Cantor:*

*"What have you done? Hark, thy brother's blood  
cries to me from the ground." [2]*

*Choir:*

Called by this candle  
Led to the flame  
Called to remember  
Enter the flame

*Cantor:*

all our flames now  
swaying and free  
all our hearts now  
moving as one  
every living spirit  
turned toward peace  
all our tender  
hopes awake

*Choir:*

*Called by this candle  
Led to the flame  
Called to remember  
Enter the flame*

***Fire:    howl***

***Fire:    broken***

***Fire:    burst***

***Fire:    rage***

***Fire:    swell***

***Fire:    shatter***

***Fire:    wail***

***Fire***

We all betray the ancient heart  
Ev'ry one of us, all of us

His heart, my heart, your heart, one heart

“In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.” [3]

Burning Breaking Grasping Raging

*how do we keep these  
flames in our hands?  
how do we guard these  
fears in our hearts?  
how long to hold these  
griefs in our songs?*

*remembering anger  
weave it with hope  
remembering exile  
braid it with praise  
longing past horror  
longing past dread  
dreaming of healing  
past all our pain*

**Fire: living in me**  
**Fire: purify**  
**Fire: now hold me**  
**Fire: seize my heart**

*(enter the flame, enter the flame  
shatter my heart, shatter my heart  
called to enter, burn a hundred veils)*

Called by this flame  
Fire of my heart:  
Break down all walls  
Open all doors  
Only this Love

“Eyes of flesh, eyes of fire” [4]

*Lumina, lumina, lumina  
Open us,  
All!*

*(In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.)*

## **RECITATION V**

***Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were arrested shortly after the attack and charged with murder, kidnapping and aggravated robbery. The first of two trials began on October 26, 1999: both men were convicted of the murder and were given two consecutive life sentences.***

### **We Are All Sons**

*Stray birds of summer come to my window to sing and fly away.*

*And yellow leaves of autumn which have no songs flutter and fall there with a sigh.*

*Once we dreamt that we were strangers.*

*We wake up to find that we were dear to each other.*

we are all sons of fathers and mothers

we are all sons

we are all rivers

the roar of waters, we are all sons

### **I Am Like You**

I am like you

Aaron

and Russell

When I think of you (and honestly I don't like to think about you)  
but sometimes I do,

I am so horrified, and just so angry and confused (and scared)  
that you could do things to another boy—they were so cruel and  
so undeserved, so dark and hard and full of (I don't know)

Late one night I had a glimpse  
of something I recognized, just a tiny glimpse—  
I don't even like to say this out loud,  
it isn't even all that true—  
but I wondered for a moment,  
am I like you? (in any way)

(I pray the answer is no)

Am I like you?

I bet you once had hopes and dreams, too.

Some things we love get lost along the way,  
That's just like me: get lost along the way—  
I am like you, I get confused and I'm afraid  
and I've been reckless, I've been restless, bored,  
unthinking, listless, intoxicated,  
I've come unhinged,  
and made mistakes  
and hurt people very much.

Sometimes I feel (in springtime, in early afternoon)  
the sunshine warm on my face;  
you feel this too (don't you?),  
the sunshine warm on your face.

I am like you.  
(this troubles me)  
I am like you.  
(just needed to say this).

Some things we love get lost along the way.

we are all sons of fathers and mothers  
we are all sons

sometimes no home for us here on the earth  
no place to lay our heads  
we are all sons of fathers and mothers

if you could know for one moment  
how it is to live in our bodies  
within the world

if you could know

you ask too much of us  
you ask too little

## **The Innocence**

When I think of all the times the world was ours for dreaming,  
When I think of all the times the earth seemed like our home-  
Every heart alive with its own longing,  
Every future we could ever hope to hold.

All the times our laughter rang in summer,  
All the times the rivers sang our tune-  
Was there already sadness in the sunlight?  
Some stormy story waiting to be told?

*Where O where has the innocence gone?  
Where O where has it gone?  
Rains rolling down wash away my memory;  
Where O where has it gone?*

When I think of all the joys, the wonders we remember  
All the treasures we believed we'd never ever lose.  
Too many days gone by without their meaning,  
Too many darkened hours without their peace.

*Where O where has the innocence gone?  
Where O where has it gone?  
Vows we once swore, now it's just this letting go,  
Where O where has it gone?*

## **RECITATION VI**

***In the days and weeks after Matthew's death, many people came to the fence to pay homage and pray and grieve.***

## **The Fence (*one week later*)**

*I have seen people come out here with a pocketknife and take a piece of the fence, like a relic, like an icon. –Rev. Stephen M. Johnson, Unitarian minister*

I keep still  
I stand firm  
I hold my ground  
while they lay down

some of them touch me  
in unexpected ways  
without asking permission  
and then move on

flowers and photos  
prayers and poems  
crystals and candles  
sticks and stones

but I don't mind  
being a shrine  
is better than being  
the scene of the crime

they come in herds  
they stand and stare  
they sit and sigh  
they crouch and cry

## **RECITATION VII**

*Matthew's father made his statement to the court on November 5, 1999.*

## **STARS**

*By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie.*

*I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.*

## ***RECITATION VIII***

***Matthew was left tied to the fence for almost eighteen hours.***

### **In Need of Breath**

*Matt:*

My heart

Is an unset jewel

Upon the tender night

Yearning for its dear old friend

The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again

Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings

And reveal such a radiance inside

I enter a realm divine—

I too begin to sweetly cast light,

Like a lamp,

I cast light

Through the streets of this

World.

My heart is an unset jewel

Upon existence

Waiting for the Friend's touch.

Tonight

Tonight

My heart is an unset ruby

Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.

I am dying in these cold hours

For the resplendent glance of God.

My heart

Is an unset jewel

Upon the tender night

My heart is an unset ruby

Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.

## **RECITATION IX**

***Sheriff's Deputy Reggie Fluty, the first to report to the scene, told Judy Shepard that as she ran to the fence she saw a large doe lying near Matt—as if the deer had been keeping him company all through the night.***

### **Deer Song**

*Deer:*

A mist is over the mountain,  
    The stars in their meadows upon the air,  
Your people are waiting below them,  
    And you know there's a gathering there.  
All night I lay there beside you,  
    I cradled your pain in my care,  
We move through creation together,  
    And we know there's a welcoming there.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,  
    Calling, calling clear;  
Always with us, evergreen heart,  
    Where can we be but there?

*Matthew:*

I'll find all the love I have longed for,  
    The home that's been calling my heart so long  
So soon I'll be cleansed in those waters,  
    My fevers forever be gone;  
Where else on earth but these waters?  
    No more, no more to be torn;  
My own ones, my dearest, are waiting—  
    And I'll weep to be where I belong.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,  
    Calling, calling clear;  
Always with me, evergreen heart,  
    Where can I be but here?

## **RECITATION X**

***The fence has been torn down.***



## EPILOGUE

### **Meet Me Here**

*Meet me here*

*Won't you meet me here*

*Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins*

*There's a balm in the silence*

*Like an understanding air*

*Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins*

We've been walking through the darkness

On this long, hard climb

Carried ancestral sorrow

For too long a time

Will you lay down your burden

Lay it down, come with me

It will never be forgotten

Held in love, so tenderly

*Meet me here*

*Won't you meet me here*

*Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins*

*There's a joy in the singing*

*Like an understanding air*

*Where the fence ends and the horizon begins.*

Then we'll come to the mountain

We'll go bounding to see

That great circle of dancing

And we'll dance endlessly

And we'll dance with the all the children

Who've been lost along the way

We will welcome each other

Coming home, this glorious day

*We are home in the mountain*

*And we'll gently understand*

*That we've been friends forever*

*That we've never been alone*

*We'll sing on through any darkness*

*And our Song will be our sight*

*We can learn to offer praise again*

*Coming home to the light . . .*

## **All Of Us**

What could be the song?  
Where begin again?  
Who could meet us there?  
Where might we begin?  
From the shadows climb,  
Rise to sing again;  
Where could be the joy?  
How do we begin?

Never our despair,  
Never the least of us,  
Never turn away,  
Never hide our face;  
Ordinary boy,  
Only all of us,  
Free us from our fear,  
Only all of us.

What could be the song?  
Where begin again?  
Who could meet us there?  
Where might we begin?  
From the shadows climb,  
Rise to sing again;  
Where could be the joy?  
How do we begin?

Never our despair,  
Never the least of us,  
Never turn away,  
Never hide your face;  
Ordinary boy,  
Only all of us,  
Free us from our fear.

Only in the Love,  
Love that lifts us up,  
Clear from out the heart  
From the mountain's side,  
Come creation come,  
Strong as any stream;  
How can we let go? How can we forgive?  
How can we be dream?

Out of heaven, rain,  
Rain to wash us free;  
Rivers flowing on,  
Ever to the sea;  
Bind up every wound,  
Every cause to grieve;  
Always to forgive,  
Only to believe.

[Chorale:]  
*Most noble Light, Creation's face,  
How should we live but joined in you,  
Remain within your saving grace  
Through all we say and do  
And know we are the Love that moves  
The sun and all the stars? [5]  
O Love that dwells, O Love that burns  
In every human heart.*

(Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up!)

*This evergreen, this heart, this soul,  
Now moves us to remake our world,  
Reminds us how we are to be  
Your people born to dream;  
How old this joy, how strong this call,  
To sing your radiant care  
With every voice, in cloudless hope  
Of our belonging here.*

Only in the Love . . . Only all of us . . .

*(Heaven: Wash me . . .)*

All of us, only all of us.

What could be the song?  
Where do we begin?  
Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up.

All Of Us

All.

## **Reprise: This Chant of Life (Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass)**

(This chant of life cannot be heard  
It must be felt, there is no word  
To sing that could express the true  
Significance of how we wind  
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind  
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass  
And all these things that sway and pass.)

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,  
Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

After the concert, please join us upstairs in the main-floor  
lobby to chat with the performers.

## **Considering Matthew Shepard**

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## **“Introduction” from OCTOBER MOURNING: A SONG FOR MATTHEW SHEPARD by Lesléa Newman**

On Tuesday, October 6, 1998, at approximately 11:45 p.m., twenty-one-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay college student attending the University of Wyoming, was kidnapped from a bar by twenty-one-year-old Aaron McKinney and twenty-one-year-old Russell Henderson. Pretending to be gay, the two men lured Matthew Shepard into their truck, drove him to the outskirts of Laramie, robbed him, beat him with a pistol, tied him to a buck-rail fence, and left him to die. The next day, at about 6:00 p.m. – eighteen hours after the attack – he was discovered and taken to a hospital. He never regained consciousness and died five days later, on Monday, October 12, with his family by his side.

One of the last things Matthew Shepard did that Tuesday night was attend a meeting of the University of Wyoming’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Association. The group was putting final touches on plans for Gay Awareness Week, scheduled to begin the following Sunday, October 11, coinciding with a National Coming Out Day. Planned campus activities included a film showing, an open poetry reading, and a keynote speaker.

That keynote speaker was me.

I never forgot what happened in Laramie, and around the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, I found myself thinking more and more about him. And so I began writing a series of poems, striving to create a work of art that explores the events surrounding Matthew Shepard’s murder in order to gain a better understanding of their impact on myself and the world.

What really happened at the fence that night? Only three people know the answer to that question. Two of them are imprisoned, convicted murderers whose stories often contradict each other (for example, in separate interviews both McKinney and Henderson have claimed that he

alone tied Matthew Shepard to the fence). The other person who knows what really happened that night is dead. We will never know his side of the story.

This book is my side of the story.

*While the poems in this book are inspired by actual events, they do not in any way represent the statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, or attitudes of any actual person. The statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and attitudes conveyed belong to me. All monologues contained within the poems are figments of my imagination; no actual person spoke any of the words contained within the body of any poem. Those words are mine and mine alone. When the words of an actual person are used as a short epigraph for a poem, the source of that quote is cited at the back of the book in a section entitled "Notes," which contains citations and suggestions for further reading about the crime. The poems, which are meant to be read in sequential order as one whole work, are a work of poetic invention and imagination: a historical novel in verse. The poems are not an objective reporting of Matthew Shepard's murder and its aftermath; rather they are my own personal interpretation of them.*

There is a bench on the campus of the University of Wyoming dedicated to Matthew Shepard, inscribed with the words *He continues to make a difference*. My hope is that readers of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* will be inspired to make a difference and honor his legacy by erasing hate and replacing it with compassion, understanding, and love.



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## Thank You

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\*\*\*\*\*

Join us on **Friday May 26, 7:30 pm** at Calvary Church (89 Scott St.) for a joint concert with the **Missouri State University Chorale** under the direction of Dr. Cameron LaBarr. Tickets are \$10; \$5 for students.

We're also busy planning our 2023-24 season. Follow us on social media or check our website, [avantisingers.com](http://avantisingers.com), for details.