

The Drowning Shore

*first performance 19th November 2020
as a cantata for a mezzo-soprano in a screen
commissioned by Compass Presents as part of Oracles in Sepia*

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words and music by Alastair White
with excerpts from Sholem Asch's The God of Vengeance
translated by Isaac Goldberg
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1) The Sickness

1987, a robot man uses a videophone. The children stare, open-mouthed, as words pass through their televisions. Falling through time, words changed before our eyes — to omen of screens' banality. Copy out sketched languages in red, blue, green runes — spell, *Za...*

"And know, that a Holy Scroll is a wondrous possession. The whole world rests upon a Scroll of the Law, and every Scroll is the exact counterpart of the tablets that were received by Moses upon Mount Sinai. Every line of a Holy Scroll is penned in purity and piety. . . Where dwells a Scroll, in such a house dwells God himself. . ." hot. . . bright. . . white. . . light. . . spells,

Sticky film, fluid.
Lilypads' translucence.
By *Rainskin*, you were known
O, lobbed flakes of loch-ice
spinning over Rannoch's black sheet.

Glere-laim lends snell tae the wool
the loch, gloam tae thi heath.
Breath crome an rowpit as the swar ae weeds,
slake-kail-, badderlock-, wrack-wrapped tide heaves
saut-brack an mang upo' thi yird's lied. . . *lik. . . ab. . . O,*
the neither/nor ae rockpools; the inside-oot o crabmeat —
doun the loch's lithe mairch, thi wean splutters an breathes.

That nicht, runs a bath, haulds a toe upon the watter,
lit by oam and blinking halogen: a border.

. . . *a. . . line. . . lie. . . ay. . .*

2) The Spell

The bairnie's lung nou cauld an croupit,
the mither reaches for a cure.
She kens the body is but watter,
pigskin seal ae bluid an stoor:
Wir bodies. Boggin, bouk-rank cluiter.
Pails shut up by lines and wirds
lik ony tidepool. Claggit fou wi patter
crablike, till they gie whit's heard. . . *ear. . . I. . . ee. . .*

"I promise not to touch your Holy Law. . . She will carry it. It will be placed in her room. And when you are married and leave my roof, take the Scroll of the Law with you to your husband's home. . . when my daughter is married, I'll give her as a dowry a pile of money, and I'll say to her: "Go out of your father's house and forget. . . forget your father. . . forget your mother. . ."

Forget the laund.
Forget the sound ae the wird that drowns.

Whit's thi wurd? Whit's thi need ae it?
The beuk ae spell, where the laund thit doesnae endure
be makkit. A spell fir warding yir modern brattach.
Tae sing awa, awa, ye lines ae lung an land.

The wean's chest rattles on the saund.

Tak hinniesweet bluum an postpane, parritch-plain
clearness ae winter shore: oceans' hoarhinder.

As the wean's breath waffs i thi blinter.

Bruim-yellae thrimmelt tween twa sheet ae gless

— *gless o stone, saund, o still clear watter* —

buirit by ingan facing north, tae thi Grampians.

Whit's the glamour? Thi vaam tae cast?

— *word o saund, o still, clear pane* — in

skunging thraw crackles doune cleuch an gullet:

clochering belloch in hushoch an hotchpotch.

Collaged, mockit nonsense. Magic is but

words and bodies: lines shut up by the haund an shin. . . *sing . . sing . .*

Lips move in time wi thi wind.

"But they say that you mustn't read from such a Holy Scroll, and that the daughter of such mothers become what the mothers themselves were. . . that something draws them on like a magnet, and that the Evil Spirit drags them down into the mire. . . An old fortune-teller; — a sorceress told it to me. . . it's just as if such a daughter were in the power of an enchantment. . ."

. . . and . . the . . spell . . was:

3) The Spell's Writing

Broom's yellow pressed between two panes of glass,
buried by onion facing north, to the Grampian mountains.

What is the spell? What are the words to speak?

The spell is but silence in the alien language

words that cover the earth with gold,

gunships, articles, contract-law and theatre.

What is the spell? What is the need of it?

Break

the appetites of murderous land.

Those lungs filled with water and signs

marking borders. That calm, collected, killing advice

hangs flags of blanched skin and flotation devices.

Crush rowan fruit, garlic, rub the paste upon the earth's shore —

"You, Holy Scroll, I know, — you are a great God! For you are our Lord! I . . have sinned. My sins. . my sins. . Work a miracle, — send down a pillar of fire to consume me. On this very spot, where I now stand! Open up the earth at my feet and let it swallow me! But shield my daughter. . I know. . to You everything is possible. Work a miracle! For You are an almighty God. And if You don't, then You're no God at all, I tell you. I . . tell You that You are as vengeful as any human being. . ."

It's magic, only —

2020, the girl reaches to touch her lover. The glass pane, almost ripples

♩ = 120

Mezzo-soprano

Nine-teen eigh-ty se-ven, a ro-bot man u - ses a vid-e-o- phone. The chil-dren stare o-pen mouthed as words

4

pass through their te - le - vi sions. Fa-lling through time words changed be-fore our eyes to

6

o-men of screens ba-na-li - ty. Co-py out sketched lan-gua-ges in red, blue green, runes

9

spell Za Zolst vi-sen a se - fer toy - re iz a groyse zakh. Af a se - fer toy - re

14

shteht ge-shtitst di gan-tse velt, un ye - des se - fer toy - re iz punkt a-zoy vi di lu - khes voz ze-nen a -

20

rob-ge-ge-ben tsu moy-she ra - be-nu fun barg si-nay a - rob. Ye-der shu-re vert ge-shri-ben in

26

se - fer toy - re b' - to - ra v' kid-u - sha. In dem hoyz-vu es shtet a se - fer toy - re dort ge-fint zikh

32

got. hot bright white light spells, Sti-cky film, flu-id. Li-ly-pads' -

37

trans - lu - scence. By Rain - skin you were known. O,

39

lobbed fla - kes'of loch ice spin-ning o - ver Rann-och's black sheet.

42 *< f > ppp < ff mp > ppp < mf > mp > ppp < f mp*

Gleh e__ rel lai__ lai__ lie__ lai__ Gle - rel laim lends snell tae thi wool the

46 *f p < ff mf ppp*

loch, gloam tae the heath. Breath_ crome_ and row -

49 *mp f p 3 fff*

- pit as the swar__ ae weeds, slake - kail, ba - dder lock, wrack-wrapped tide_ heaves_

52 *f mp < f > ppp f > pp < mf* $\text{♩} = 120$

saut-brack an mang u-pon thi yird's lied__ lik ah__ O__

56 *fff p < fff mp f > pp < ff > ppp p* $\text{♩} = 140$

ah__ ah__ ah__ ah__ O__ The nei - ther/nor ae rock-pools; the

60 *ppp smfz pp smfz p*

in-side oot o crab - meat, doune the loch's lithe maich the wean spl-utters an breathes. That

63 *pp < mp ppp mf* $\text{♩} = 120$

nicht runs a bath haulds a toe u-pon the wa tter, lit by oam and blink-ing ha-lo-gen_ a bor-der, a

68 *ff mp f > mp*

line__ lie__ ay__ The bair-nie's lung nou cauld and crou - pit, -

72 *p < mf*

the mi - ther__ rea-ches for a cure. She kens the bo - dy__ is but wa-tter,

75 *ff mp f > p < mf f*

pig - skin__ seal ae bluid an stoor. Wir bo - dies. Bo-ggin, buik-rank clui - ter. Pails shut

78 *mp f mf ppp < p < mp fff pp*

up__ by lines an wirds lik on-y tide-pool. Clagg-it fou wi pa-tter crab-like, till they gie_ whit's

82 *ppp* *p* *mf*

 heard ear I ee Ike

86 ♩ = 130

 Ikh vel zikh nisht tsu - rih-ren tsu a-yer se - fer toy - re. Zi vet der-mit um-gehn. Bay ir in shti-bl ikh dos

93

 se - fer toy - re shtelen. Kha-se - ne hoben, a-roys fun mayn hoyz geht dir dos se - fer toy-re - le

98

 mit mit dir tsi dayn man. Az mayn tokh-ter vet kha-se - ne hoben, vel ikh ir nadn geben, a

103 *accel.*

 sakh gelt nadn un vel zogn tsu ir a - zoy: Du geh a - roys fun dayn tats hoyz un fer - ges. Fer

110 *ppp*

 ges dayn ta-ten, fer - ges dayn ma men, for-get the laund, for-get the sound ae the wurd that

117 ♩ = 80 *f*

 drowns. What's thi wurd? What's thi need ae it? The buik ae spell where the laund thit does-nae en

121

 dure be ma - kkit. A spell fir war-ding yir mo-dern bra - ttach. Tae sing a -

123 *ppp*

 wa, a - wa, ye lines ae lung an land. The wean's chest ra-ttles on the saund. Tak

125 *p*

 hin - nie - sweet blum an post - pane, pa - rritch - plain

126 *f* *mf* *ff* *mf* *pp* *sfz* *p*

 clear - ness ae win-ter shore: o - cean's hoar-hin - der. As the wean's breath waffs i thi blin - ter.

128 *mp* *p*
 Bruim-ye - llae thri-mmelt tveen twa sheet ae gless, gless o stone, saund, o still clear wat - ter

130 *ppp* *ff* *mp*
 bui - rit by ing-an fa-cing north, tae thi Gram - pi - ans. Whit's the gla-mour? Thi vaam tae cast?

132 *pp* *p* *fff* *tr*
 word o saund, o still, clear pane, in skung-ing thraw crack-les doune cluech an gu - llet:

134 *ppp* *harsh whisper* *fff* *ppp* *fff* *ppp* *fff*
 clo-che-ring bel-loch in hu-shoch an hotch - potch. Coll- aged, mock-it non - sense.

136 *mp* *ppp*
 Ma - gic is but words and bo - dies: lines shut up by the haund an shin sing

139 *mf* *ppp*
 sing Lips move in time wi thi wind

Whisper, still slightly 'broken' in places but with some natural phrases coming through:

Men zogt OB-er, az in a-ZAR SAY-fer TOY-rer tor men nisht LAY-a-nen,
 un di TEKH-ter fun a ZEL-kher MAA-mes VER-n der-NOKH a-LANE vi di MOO-ters...

Slightly regaining chanting and pitch (on middle C sharp):

$\text{♩} = 130$...es zeet zay, der YAY-tsa HOR-a shlept zay in der BLOT-a ...

145 *rall.* $\text{♩} = 100$
 an alt - a bob-a a kish-af hot es meer ga zogt a - zoy vee kish-af iz dos and the spell was: Broom's yel-low

153 *pp* *p* *mf* *p* *f*
 pressed be-tween two panes of glass, bu-ried by on-ion fa-cing north, to the Gram pi-an

160 *p* *ppp* *p*
 moun-tains. What is the spell, what are the words to speak? The spell is but

168 *f* *mp* *clap along with each accented beat*
 si-lence in the a - li-en lan - guage, words that co-ver the earth with gold, gun-ships,

174 *sfz* *mp* *fff poss.*
 art-i-cles, con-tract law and the-a-tre. What is the spell? What is the need of it? Break

182 *mp*
 the ap-pet-tites of mur - de-rous land. Those lungs filled with wa - ter and signs mar - king

188 *ppp*
 bor - ders. That calm, col-lec-ted, kil-ling ad-vice hangs

193
 flags of blanched skin and flo - ta - tion de - vic - es.

199
 Crush ro-wan fruit, gar-lic, rub the paste u-pon the earth's shore

Gently chanted, quickly, but very naturally and relaxed, on G (mainly) and A above middle C (F is possible also). It should sound appropriate and idiomatic for the language (in contrast to the earlier sections) but totally unsuitable for and at odds with the passage's impassioned content:

Doo, SAY-fer TOY-ra! Ikh vays — doo bists a GROY-ser got! Doo bist dokh OON-zer got. Ikh...hob ga-ZIN-digt...
 MY-ner zind, MY-ner zind...doo makh a nes - doo shik a-ROP af mir a fire un far-BREN mikh, ot a-ZOY vee ikh shtay!
 Doo EF-n oyf di erd un loz mikh EIN-ga-zun-ken ver-en...nor mein kind hit mir op...ikh vays...
 by deer iz alts MEG-likh...doo too a nes...doo bizt dokh a GROY-ser got...az nisht biz-too kein got nisht...
 zog ikh dir, ikh...az doo bizt ne-KUM-a-dik, vee a mentsh bizt doo...

204
 zog ikh dir az doo bizt ne - kum - a - dik vee a mentsh bitz

210
 doo... It's mag - ic, on - ly.

Spoken, normally, but lightly clapping along with the natural rhythm of the sentence:

2020, the girl reaches out to touch her lover. The glass pane, almost ripples.