

Iron Balconies and Lilies
for soprano, piano and chamber ensemble
Robert Greenberg
(1992)

Program Note

I.	A City By The Sea	Anna Margolin
II.	Hay Mowing	Moyshe Kulbak
III.	When Grandma, May She Rest In Peace, Died	Moyshe Kulbak
IV.	Longing	Rachel Korn
V.	Ancient Murderess Night	Anna Margolin
VI.	Lullaby	Traditional
VII.	Toys	Abraham Sutskever
VIII.	Old Age	Jacob Gladstein
IX.	Rest	Jacob Isaac Segal

IRON BALCONIES AND LILIES was written between December 1991 and November 1992. The nine poems of the cycle, originally in Yiddish and by various poets, speak of a woman's life at various stages, from extreme old age to youth, and back to old age. The poetry is magnificent and direct: at turns quiet, passionate, gentle, ferocious, erotic, agonized and violent. In setting these poems, I have particularly sought to capture the many images and metaphors that unite them. For example, the music representing the violent, life-giving blades (scythes) of No. 2 evoke agonized, ritualized grief in No. 3, a ghastly (and comic) celebration of death in No. 5, and ultimately, a wondrous and benign angel of death in No. 9. Over the course of the cycle, the power and singular clarity of childhood memory gives way to the quiet complexity and blurred edge of adult memory.

Iron Balconies and Lilies was commissioned by and is dedicated to Sylvia Anderson.

Prelude

No. 1
A CITY BY THE SEA
Anna Margolin

When did it all happen? I can't remember.
It hangs in the air like a ghostly song:
a city by the sea, nocturnes of Chopin,
iron balconies and lilies.

Night. Two sisters dreamily touching
with their slender fingers the dim stream
of memories in an old-fashioned album.
Slowly the photographs grow young.

Through the half-open door, among the ferns,
trancelike, intoxicated figures gently sway
in a last waltz. O dead youth!
The dancers swim and fade like shadows.

It was - - it was - - I can't remember.

PART ONE: Youth

No. 2
HAY MOWING
Moyshe Kulbak

Over the fields autumn mist curled and strayed.
Grandfather left at dawn for the marsh to mow hay.
As day came the rakers, like jolly Klezmer, stood in the haze,
With Grandfather first, they sang a psalm of praise.
Then a step and a twist and a whistle, as if lightening had leapt.
For a piece of bread, children (my Grandfather said), one must sweat.
And the scythes whistled brightly.

Coats off, with thick, hairy arms - they seem more like fir-trees - my
grandfather and his brothers;
As their blades twitch, dew spurts, grass falls, one bunch on another.
A bird sings in a tree and my Grandfather beams:
"What do you say to that? A cantor, right here on the scene."
Now they sharpen their scythes, smoke, grab a sip from the pitcher,
Then arise with a groan . . . "Help me God!", back to work, blades again
all a-glitter.

And the hands bend with sureness, legs crack, arms fall and then rise,

Until all see red twilight glow dim on their scythes,
And all of them smile. They can see bread and herring, latkes and pies.
They throw on their coats, and walk along as quail shout by their way.
With their scythes on their shoulders they silently gaze, as mute as the hay.

No. 3

WHEN GRANDMA, MAY SHE REST IN PEACE, DIED
Moyshe Kulbak

When Grandma, so very old, died,
the birds were singing.
With her kind deeds and generous heart
the whole world was ringing.

When they lifted Grandma from the bed
no one made a sound,
not even a whisper, as they gently lowered
my Grandma to the ground.

Grandpa stormed 'bout the house,
silent, rage and fury in his eyes
because he, he had promised Grandma
to be the first to die!

And when they brought my Grandma's body into town,
all the Christian folk cried.
Even the Catholic priest, Vassily, wept
when he learned my dear Grandma had died.

It was only when the Shamash drew his knife
to rip in their clothes the mourner's slash
that my uncles, poor wretches, began to scream
like prisoners torn under the lash.

PART TWO: Love Songs

No. 4

Longing
Rachel Korn

My dreams are so full of longing
that every morning
my body smells of you ---
and on my bitten lip there slowly dries
the only sign of my pain, a speck of blood.

And the hours like pitchers pour hope,
that you're not far away,
and that now, at any moment,
you may come, come, come.

No. 5
ANCIENT MURDERESS NIGHT
Anna Margolin

Ancient murderess night, black mother of darkness, help me!
Beguile him, ensnare him, swallow him, flay him, tear him to bits!

And I,
whose drink was tears,
whose bread was shame,
will drink swooning
greedily and long
like a lovesong
over his corpse.
I'll arise like someone who's long been sick,
a dark figure dressed in red,
and I'll bow to all four corners of space
and I'll sing and sing and sing and sing to life
my praise of his death.

PART FOUR: Children

No. 6 LULLABY Traditional Folk Song

If I had the Emperor's might,
It would not be such a delight
as you are, my sunshine.
When I see you the world is mine.
Sleep my baby, at my breast.
Rest my darling, rest.

No. 7 TOYS Abraham Sutskever

Love your toys, my darling daughter,
Poor things, they're even smaller than you.
And at night when the fire goes out,
Cover them up with stars.

Let the golden pony graze
in cloud shadowed grass.
Lace up the little boy's shoes
when the night wind blows cold.

Put a straw hat on your doll
and put a little bell in her hand.
Love your toys, my darling daughter,
for not one of them has a mother,
So they cry out to God from their beds.

Love them, your little playthings --
I rememeber a cursed night
When there were dolls left in all the streets
Of the city. And not one child.

PART FOUR: Age

No. 8
OLD AGE
Jacob Gladstein

In old age affection thins.
You move unsure of your limbs,
feeling the prick
of every passing day.

A pity to have missed
so many (. . .)sunset.
Flowers, trees and grass
stab you with their thorn-song.
You tread
as if stepping on glass.
You acquire a cool smile.
And you grow stingy
with God's gift of time.

Postlude

No. 9
REST
Jacob Isaac Segal

Such a calmness
upon your face,
thin, perfect.
Your every word
is a song,
sharp as October's
crystal ring.

A breeze freshly falls
over your weariness,
a guest blows in - Death,
clothed in the lightest snow.

Throwing off his hat
and coat, he holds up
his proud, gray head,
joins us at our table,
and crosses his legs.
And on a silvery afternoon
our talk is filled with light.

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