

Considering Matthew Shepard **Craig Hella Johnson**

Libretto

Commissioned by Fran and Larry Collmann and Conspirare
Dedicated to Philip Overbaugh

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.

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 . . .

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." ^*

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."#

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”~

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 were convicted of the murder and sentenced to 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

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

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

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

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

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.

Stars

across

scattered

the

sky

in

blinking

dismay

unable

being

to help

light

years

away

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.

The Fence (after)/The Wind

prayed upon
frowned upon

revered
feared

adored
abhorred

despised
idolized

splintered
scarred

weathered
worn

broken down
broken up

ripped apart
ripped away

gone
but not forgotten

*The North Wind
carried his father's laugh
The South Wind
carried his mother's song
The East Wind
carried his brother's cheer
The West Wind
carried his lover's moan
The Winds of the World
wove together a prayer
to carry that hurt boy home*

prayed upon
frowned upon

revered
feared

North Wind, South Wind, East Wind, West Wind

(Splintered, scarred, weathered, worn, broken down, gone)

Winds of the World: carry him home.

Pilgrimage

The land was sold and a new fence now stands about fifty yards away. People still come to pay their respects. – Jim Osborn, friend of Matthew Shepard

I walk to the fence with beauty before me
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want

I walk to the fence with beauty behind me
Yit'gadal v'yit' kadash (may his great name grow)

I walk to the fence with beauty above me
Om Mani Padme Ham (Om! the jewel in the lotus, hum!)

I walk to the fence with beauty below me
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit

I reach the fence surrounded by beauty
wail of wind, cry of hawk

I leave the fence surrounded by beauty
sigh of sagebrush, hush of stone

*(Beauty above me, beauty below me
By beauty surrounded)*

Still, still, still, I wonder....
wail of wind, cry of hawk

Still, still, still, I wonder. . .
wail of wind, cry of hawk

Still still still

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.

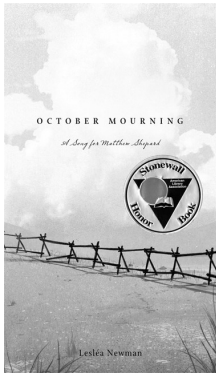
I never forgot what happened in Laramie, and around the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, I found myself thinking more and more about him. And so I began writing a series of poems, striving to create a work of art that explores the events surrounding Matthew Shepard’s murder in order to gain 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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Conspirare, The Matthew Shepard Foundation, and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are partnering to ensure that *Considering Matthew Shepard* reaches as many people as possible on the stage and screen. The Matthew Shepard Foundation has provided ongoing support in outreach and project development. Conspirare and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are co-producing a *Considering Matthew Shepard* television special commemorating the 20th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's passing. KLRU profiled Craig Hella Johnson's creative process in their documentary series *Arts in Context* (available at artsincontext.org). The film will be accompanied by outreach and engagement programs.