

Centuries in the Hours

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: Orchestral version premiered September 27, 2019, Miller Outdoor Theater, Houston, TX. Commissioned by ASCAP Foundation Charles Kingsford Fund and ROCO (River Oaks Chamber Orchestra).

Duration: 18'

Instrumentation: Mezzo soprano solo; piano

Centuries in the Hours is a five-song orchestral cycle composed expressly for blind mezzo-soprano Laurie Rubin. Each song is a setting of a diary excerpt by an American woman whose life circumstances rendered her historically invisible. The project meditates on the theme of invisibility: How do we, through performance, make visible the invisible, make things vivid in unexpected ways? To that end, it brings to light written words of women who were "invisible" in their social milieu, while it celebrates heightened non-visual communication and shared leadership in performance.

The idea grew out of my residency as a William Randolph Hearst Visiting Artist Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA. There I began uncovering an entire alternative American history, woven together through the experiences of women from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, of all ages, from all corners of the US and its nascent territories, and from all chapters of our history. I eventually read 72 diaries, representing staggering diversity. The five women included here are: Emily, a recently divorced and impoverished house cleaner in 1890's Denver; Betsey, a freed slave who became a missionary and traveled by ship in 1822 from the Northeast to Hawaii, around Cape Horn; Angeles, a brilliant and ambitious Filipina teenager in the 1920's who moved with her family first to Hawaii and then to Stockton, CA; Sallie, a Civil War-era plantation owner's daughter near Houston, Texas, who died just a few years after her darkly introspective words were written; and Sarah, a Revolutionary War-era girl whose family fled war-torn Philadelphia to a rural area where she spent many hours hoping for a handsome "military swain" to come by. These women showed me an America that was completely unknown to me, invisible yet fully lived, behind the doors and in the corners, for centuries.

— Lisa Bielawa

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Text

Emily French, Denver, Colorado, 38 years old

January 1st, 1890

Let me only in the fear of God put on these pages what shall transpire in my poor life.

January, Tuesday 14, 1890

How bitter cold it is tonight shall we freeze to death...below zero this morning and growing colder...

December, Wednesday 31, 1890

The wind on a perfect tare, every thing is blowing away, stove zinc rolling, pipe flying.

March, Friday 28, 1890

Must start, though it is an unlucky day...I am hurrying so to write this so it will not all be forgotten, I do get so far behind while I am working out for others. I do so pray for a rest from this, god can send it, he will, I have faith he will help us. I kneel at my bedside & ask it each night, can I be patient & wait...I am so hungry...

May, Monday 5, 1890

The heart grows weary when want stares us in the face, so little to get breakfast, what will I do, nothing to encourage me in my work, all wrong, up late, cooked some potatoes, made milk, grava & old tea.

May, Sunday 4, 1890

Fried the steak on the stove...we are so poor, can we ever get a house?

March, Saturday 29, 1890

Up so early, yet everything seems to stop me. I have tried for three days to go, cannot get started. Everything I do seems to stand still.

- Emily French's original diary is at Colorado College Special Collections. The University of Nebraska published an edited version of the diary in 1987.

Betsey Stockton, crossing by sea from New Haven to Hawaii, 25 years old

March 26th, 1823

Nothing worth noticing occurred during the day. Painting, and tarring, and writing, were carried on, as they had been for some time past. Towards evening, the dark cloud was removed from my mind, and I felt as peaceful as the ocean with which I was surrounded...the full moon shone brightly on us, without one intervening cloud, while our vessel was wafted gently on the surface of the deep.

- published in Christian Advocate, January 1, 1825; archived at American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA

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Angeles Monrayo Raymundo, Honolulu, 13 years old

October 2, 1925

And I must tell you, I like all this going to school, this learning about writing and reading. I learned something new today about other countries and people and this is geography. I did not know that we live in such a big world, so many different nationalities and countries, they live in far away places. I read in my geography book that there are four seasons in a year, Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. It is truly wonderful to know these things...Oh, there are so many other things in the geography book that I must learn and from the history book...so much to learn and remember.

- Tomorrow's Memories: A Diary, 1924-1928, by Angeles Monrayo and edited by Rizaline R. Raymundo. Published by University of Hawai'i Press. Used with permission.

Sallie McNeill, Brazoria County, Texas, 20 years old

Tuesday, October 23rd, 1860

I am tired of this stagnant, hermit Life!...I look around and ask myself, what can I do? I never find the answer. If I only had energy to rouse up and see... Nothing to do.

Tues. July 31st, 1860

We are changeful. Life is composed of alternate Storm & sunshine, of light and shadow.

May 31st, 1860

I do not know myself.

April 20th, 1867

Sleep. I wonder how I can slumber away so many hours...Very little energy is wasted – wasted in activity.

Sarah Wister, North Wales, Pennsylvania, 17 years old

1778

I sauntered through the house, upstairs, then down again, out of one chamber into the other, snatch up a book, find it old, throw peevishly down – take my work, this employs me for a few minutes, toss it away – a sigh from the inmost recesses of my heart. Oh dear, oh dear, go to the door – a long lane very muddy, the barn, fences and trees as common as my fingers. I hate the country – where now ye poets are all your charming walks, your smiling scenes? Away to the south door – overflowed meadows, board fences, sloppy roads, woods, woods, woods, continually presented...Philadelphia, dear Philadelphia, why am I absent from thee, and thy loved inhabitants? Why is not reason a resident in my heart? But what has reason to do with a discontented mind? – Obey a summons to dine – the meal over – run to my chamber – jump up – in a stupid mood. Put on my cap...Adjust my dress, toss up the window, hearing a noise and fancying it some smart military swain. Disappointed...I wish it would clear.

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