

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: April 2, 2022, Cambridge, MA. Commissioned by the Radcliffe Choral Society.
Duration: 16'
Instrumentation: Treble Chorus (SSSS AAAA), 111*1; 1000; strings (min. 22221)

Land Sea Sky was commissioned by the Radcliffe Choral Society, which has celebrated treble choral music making within the Harvard community since 1899. We decided together to respond to the particular point in these young singers' life journeys - a pandemic-interrupted education and an uncertain path forward - with a joyous retelling of three young women's odysseys: *Land*, which recounts Nairobi-based writer Edith Knight Magak's bus trip across Kenya to her nephew's eighth birthday party; *Sea*, which is a setting of diary excerpts by British-born actress Fanny Kemble as she traveled by steamship across the Atlantic into New York harbor in 1832; and *Sky*, which celebrates the audacious opera diva Elisabeth Thible, the first woman to ascend in a hot air balloon (while singing!) in 1784 in Lyon, France.

Magak came to my attention when she contributed a breathtakingly vivid testimony to my Covid lockdown crowdsourced projects. Her writing often employs humor and absurdity, but always with an arresting depth and candor. She casts a shrewd (but usually compassionate) eye on our human foibles and failings, always suggesting that the most mundane human experiences can bring us closer to our commonality in the telling. She had sent me a brief account of her bus ride to her hometown during the pandemic crisis in 2021, and for this work I invited her to expand on that story. The inner monologue in *Land* takes us through exaggerated worry, meditations on Numerology, animal sightings in the national park, dreams about cats, and finally, her arrival in Kisumu. The movement is entirely a cappella, propelled forward by the steady rhythm of bus wheels.

British actress Fanny Kemble had her debut at Covent Garden in *Romeo and Juliet* at the age of 19, but became known later in her life as a passionate abolitionist in the US. At the time of the diary excerpts used here, she was just arriving in the US as a young woman of 23. Her narrative, which spans a month-long journey on the steamship *Pacific*, gives a leading role to the weather - rain, wind, fog, calm. In this movement, the instrumental ensemble (single winds, horn and strings) joins the chorus for the first time, in the role of the Weather. They punctuate the diarist's anticipation of the new life that awaits her on new shores, and the movement ends with her exhilarating first sighting of New York.

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The figure of Mme. Thible emerged from serendipitous research. In a used bookstore I found a deliciously overblown 1930 compendium entitled *The World in the Air* ("First historic collection of official prints and photographs from government archives and private collections recording five thousand years of man's struggles to conquer the air") which describes Mme. Thible as "not only the first 'Woman to Make a Balloon Voyage,' but also the first person to broadcast a musical selection from the air." Intrigued, I combed through old French scientific periodicals and discovered an open letter written by Mme. Thible to a "friend." In this letter she describes her experience in ecstatic prose, also supplying the actual lines from the aria she chose to sing, from the long-forgotten 1773 opera *La Belle Arséne* by Monsigny. Further research uncovered the score to this

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Text

Land

Edith Knight Magak (2022)

11th March 2021

My nephew's turning *eight*. It's an *eight*-hour bus ride from Nairobi to Kisumu. The bus leaves at *eight*. These are my thoughts as I get on the bus. Being superstitious, I take out my phone...to ask... what the number 8 means. '*In the Bible, it represents a new beginning.*' '*In numerology, it's the number of destruction.*' What! I look out the window as the bus pulls out of the station...

As we approach Nakuru, the national park comes into sight. The grass and shrubs have turned brown. But the herd of zebras seem to graze on them just fine. The baboons, like always, waiting for people to throw them food...

I doze off thinking about cats...

After eight hours and 23 minutes, we are in Kisumu. My nephew's turning eight tomorrow. It's a new beginning.

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Sea

Fanny Kemble (1832)

Wed Aug 1 1832

...here I am on board the *Pacific*, bound for America, having left home and all the world behind...I am weary and sad, and will try to go to sleep – it rains, I cannot see the moon.

Thurs Aug 2

It rained all night and in the morning the wind had died away, and we lay rocking becalmed on the waveless waters.

Wed Aug 15th

The rain continued all day...the black sea swelled and rose, and broke upon the ship's sides into boiling furrows of foam, that fled like ghosts along the inky face of the ocean. The ship scudded before the blast and we managed to keep ourselves warm by singing.

Fri Aug 30th

A fog and calm. Sky yellow, sea grey, dripping, dark, damp, and very disagreeable. Sat working, reading and talking in our cabin all day...

Sept. 1st, Sunday

...the joyful sound – "Land! land!" was heard aloft. I rushed on deck and between the blue waveless sea and the bright unclouded sky, lay the wished-for line of a darker element.

... away went the chain, down dropped the heavy stay, the fair ship swung round, and there lay New York before us.

- From Fanny Kemble's Journals

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Sky

Mme. Elisabeth Thible (1784)

“Je te devois plutôt, ma chere ***, les détails du voyage que j’ai fait dans les airs le 4 Juin... La gloire que j’y ai trouvée est bien peu de chose en comparaison du plaisir que j’y ai ressenti..

...au moment du départ
... Le ballon s’élève, tous s’inquiètent, je les rassure...

A l’instant... nous rallumons notre feu & nous quittons la terre & ses habitans.
Adieu, leur disions-nous sans pitié...

Quelle volupté, ma chere ***, quand l’on quitte cette terre que désolent l’envie & l’intérêt!

Quelles délices lorsqu’on s’élève dans ces régions célestes où regne, il est vrai, le silence le plus majestueux, mais aussi la paix la plus parfaite!

Dans ce calme imposant, qu’il est facile d’oublier ce pauvre globe duquel on s’éloigne!
Quelles réflexions ne fis-pas en voyant l’aigle planer sous mes pieds!

Je m’abandonnai aux transports qu’elles me causerent; malgré moi, je chantois comme ARSENE:

*Est-il un sort plus glorieux?
Je marcherai sur le tonnerre,
Et je regnerai dans les cieux.
Je m’élève au delà des airs,
Et je plane sur l’univers!*

I must tell you, my dear, about my voyage in the air on June 4... The glory I found there is nothing compared to the pleasure I felt.

The moment of departure...
the balloon rises - everyone worries, I reassure them...

All at once...we lit our fire and left the earth and its inhabitants.
Adieu, we said to them carelessly...

What rapture, my dear, when one leaves this earth, so devoid of desire and interest!

What delights when one rises into these celestial regions where – it is true – the most majestic silence, but also the most perfect peace, reign!

In this commanding calm, it is so easy to forget the poor globe we leave behind. How can one not reflect, while watching the eagle soar beneath one’s feet!

I surrendered to these transports... in spite of myself, I sang like ARSENE:

*Is there a fate more glorious?
I will walk on thunder,
And I will reign in the skies.
I rise beyond the air,
And I soar above the universe.*

- from *Le Journal Encyclopédie*, October 1784; with excerpts from the opera *La Belle Arsène*, libretto by Charles Simon Favart, music by Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny, 1773

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