



Considering Matthew Shepard

by Craig Hella Johnson

the Chancel Choir of Park Church and the Holland Chorale
under the direction of Patrick Coyle

February 25, 2023

Contributions at today's performance will be divided between
the *Matthew Shepard Foundation* and *Our LGBTQ Fund*.

Administered by Grand Rapids Community Foundation, *Our LGBTQ Fund* was established in 2014
to provide a safe, welcoming and healthy environment for LGBTQ+ communities in West Michigan by
increasing wellness and prosperity levels, visibility, acceptance, support and access to resources.

CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD

by Craig Hella Johnson

*presented by the Chancel Choir of Park Church and the Holland Chorale
in recognition of the 25th anniversary year of the death of Matthew Shepard*

PROLOGUE

All.

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,
who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

1. CATTLE, HORSES, SKY AND GRASS

Cattle, horses, sky and grass
These are the things that sway and pass
Before our eyes and through our dreams
Through shiny, sparkly, golden gleams
Within our psyche that find and know
The value of this special glow
That only gleams for those who bleed
Their soul and heart and utter need
Into the mighty, throbbing Earth
From which springs life and death and birth.

I'm alive! I'm alive, I'm alive, golden. I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .

These cattle, horses, grass, and sky
Dance and dance and never die
They circle through the realms of air
And ground and empty spaces where
A human being can join the song
Can circle, too, and not go wrong
Amidst the natural, pulsing forces
Of sky and grass and cows and horses.

I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .

This chant of life cannot be heard
It must be felt, there is no word
To sing that could express the true

Significance of how we wind
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind,
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass
And all these things that sway and pass.

2. ORDINARY BOY

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy, ordinary boy . . .

Born in December in Casper, Wyoming

Ordinary boy

to a father, Dennis, and a mother, Judy.

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

Then came a younger brother, Logan.

Ordinary boy

His name was Matthew Wayne Shepard. And one day his name came to be known around the world. But as his mother said:

Judy Shepard: You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt.

He went camping, he went fishing, even hunting for a moose
He read plays and he read stories and especially *Dr. Seuss*,

He wrote poems with illustrations for the neighbors on the street.
And he left them in each mailbox till he learned it was illegal.

He made friends and he wore braces and his frame was rather small,
He sang songs his father taught him.

Frere Jacques . . .

Row Row Row Your Boat . . .

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star . . .

Judy: He was my son, my first-born, and more. He was my friend, my confidant, my constant reminder of how good life can be—and . . . how hurtful.

How good life can be, how good life can be

Judy: *Matt's laugh, his wonderful hugs, his stories . . .*

Matt writes about himself in a notebook:

I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest.

I am my own person. I am warm.

I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

I love Wyoming . . .

I love Wyoming very much . . .

I love theatre,
I love good friends,
I love succeeding,
I love pasta,
I love jogging,
I love walking and feeling good.

I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy
I love movies and eating and positive people and pasta and driving and walking and jogging and kissing and
learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and being myself.
I love theatre! I love theatre! And I love to be on stage!

Such an ordinary boy living ordinary days in an ordinary life so worth living.
He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears with an ordinary hope for belonging

He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears with an ordinary hope for belonging
(Born to live this ordinary life)

Just an ordinary boy living ordinary days with extraordinary kindness,
extraordinary laughter, extraordinary shining,
extraordinary light and joy, joy and light.

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

3. WE TELL EACH OTHER STORIES/I AM OPEN

We tell each other stories so that we will remember,
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days.

Always telling stories, wanting to remember
Where and whom we came from,
Who we are.

Sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember,
One that breaks the heart of us all.
Still we tell the story;
We're listening and confessing what we have forgotten
In the story of us all.

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Trying to find the meaning . . .

*I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy
Who never had expected his life would be this story
(could be any boy).*

I am open to hear a story

Open, listen, all.

PASSION

4. 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.

5. THE FENCE (THAT NIGHT)

*Most noble evergreen with your roots in the sun:
you shine in the cloudless sky of a sphere no earthly eminence can grasp,
You blush like the dawn, you burn like a flame of the sun.*

I held him all night long.
He was heavy as a broken heart.
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes;
He was dead weight, yet he kept breathing.

He was heavy as a broken heart,
His own heart wouldn't stop beating,
The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing,
His face streaked with moonlight and blood.
I tightened my grip and held on.

The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing;
We were out on the prairie alone.
I tightened my grip and held on.
I saw what was done to this child.

We were out on the prairie alone;
Their truck was the last thing he saw.
I saw what was done to this child.
I cradled him just like a mother.

Most noble evergreen, most noble evergreen, your roots in the sun . . .

Their truck was the last thing he saw.
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes.
I cradled him just like a mother.
held him all night long.

Most noble evergreen . . .

6. A PROTESTOR

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!

7. KEEP IT AWAY FROM ME (THE WOUND OF LOVE)

Don't wanna look on this,
never get near;
flames too raw for me,
grief too deep.
Keep it away from me.

Stay out of my heart, Stay out of my hope.

Some son, somebody's pain;
some child gone, child never mine.
Born to this trouble, don't wanna be born to this world,
world where sometimes "yes,"
world where mostly "no."

The wound of love . . .

Smoke round my throat,
rain down my soul;
no heaven lies,
keep them gone,
keep them never,
grief too deep, flames too raw.
Keep them away from me

*stay out of my heart,
stay out of my hope*

Don't try any old story on me (*Don't even try*).

No wing, no song,
no cry, no comfort ye,
no wound ever mine.

Close up the gates of night.

the wound of love

Keep this all away from me.

the wound of love

you take away

the wounds of the world.

Keep it away from me.

8. 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."

Cantor: *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!

Cantor: *In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.*

9. STRAY BIRDS/10. 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.

11. I AM LIKE YOU

I am like you Aaron and Russell.
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.

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.
We are all rivers, the roar of waters, 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.

12. 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?*

13. 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.

14. STARS

Matthew's father Dennis made his statement to the court:

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.

15. IN NEED OF BREATH

Matt:

My heart is an unset jewel
Upon the tender night
Yearning for its dear old friend
The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings
And reveal such a radiance inside, such a radiance.

I enter a realm divine
I too begin to sweetly cast light.
Like a lamp, I cast light
Through the streets of this World.

My heart is an unset jewel upon existence,
Waiting for the Friend's touch.

Tonight, tonight.

My heart is an unset ruby
Offered, bowed and weeping to the Sky.
I am dying in these cold hours
For the resplendent glance of God.

16. 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?

17. THE FENCE (AFTER)/THE WIND

*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.*

Winds of the World, carry him home.

EPILOGUE

18. MEET ME HERE

*Meet me here, won't you meet me here,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins?
There's a balm in the silence like an understanding air
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins.*

We've been walking through the darkness on this long, hard climb,
Carried ancestral sorrow for too long a time.
Will you lay down your burden, lay it down, come with me?
It will never be forgotten, held in love, so tenderly.

*Meet me here, won't you meet me here,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins?
There's a joy in the singing, like an understanding air
Where the fence ends and the horizon begins.*

Then we'll come to the mountain, we'll go bounding to see
That great circle of dancing, and we'll dance endlessly.
And we'll dance with the all the children who've been lost along the way.
We will welcome each other, coming home, this glorious day.

*We are home in the mountain, and we'll gently understand
That we've been friends forever, that we've never been alone.
We'll sing on through any darkness and our song will be our sight.
We can learn to offer praise again, coming home to the light . . .*

19. ALL OF US

What could be the song? Where begin again?
Who could meet us there? Where might we begin?
From the shadows climb, Rise to sing again;
Where could be the joy? How do we begin?

Never our despair, never the least of us,
Never turn away, never hide our face;
Ordinary boy, only all of us,
Free us from our fear.

Only in the Love,
Love that lifts us up,
Clear from out the heart
From the mountain's side,
Come creation come,
Strong as any stream;
How can we let go?
How can we forgive?
How can we be dream?

Out of heaven, rain, rain to wash us free;
Rivers flowing on, ever to the sea;
Bind up every wound, every cause to grieve;
Always to forgive, only to believe.

*Most noble Light, Creation's face,
How should we live but joined in you?
Remain within Your saving grace
Through all we say and do;
And know we are the Love that moves the sun and all the stars?
O Love that dwells, O Love that burns in every human heart!*

(Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up!)

*This evergreen, this heart, this soul, Now moves us to remake our world,
Reminds us how we are to be Your people born to dream;
How old this joy, how strong this call, to sing your radiant care
With every voice, in cloudless hope of our belonging here.*

Only in the Love . . . Only all of us . . .

(Heaven, wash me!)

All of us, only all of us. What could be the song?
Where do we begin?

Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up: All Of Us;

All.

20. CATTLE, HORSES, SKY AND GRASS (REPRISE)

This chant of life cannot be heard, it must be felt, there is no word
To sing that could express the true significance of how we wind
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind,
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass
And all these things that sway and pass.

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,
Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

CHORUS (P = PARK CHURCH CHANCEL CHOIR MEMBER / H = HOLLAND CHORALE MEMBER)

PATRICK COYLE, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Dennis Baker ^P	Jo Meeuwssen ^H
Mary Bartling ^P	Rachel Mills ^P
Rick Bartling ^P	Mark Mullinax ^P
Isabel Bos ^{PH}	Gary Oegema ^H
Rebecca Boyd ^P	Todd Osbeck ^P
Sophia Brown ^P	Kathy Osborn ^P
Tom Busa ^H	Barbara Osburn ^P
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Karen Bylsma ^H	Tom Peterson ^P
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Jason Coffey ^P	Andrew Plummer ^H
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Robert Martin ^H	

RECITATIONS

Jeff Peerbolt
Clark Wells
Carrie Ledet
Barbara Osburn

SOLOS/ENSEMBLES

- 1: Tom Busa, Jean Lemmenes, Pat Easa, Sophia Brown, Schyler Sheltroun
- 2: Kim Tyler, Carrie Ledet, Mark Jackson, Evan Snyder
- 3: Schyler Sheltroun
- 4: Jeff Peerbolt
- 5: Jason Coffey
- 7: Rachel Mills, Kim Tyler, Pam Wells, Riley Wells, Barbara Osburn
- 8: Jason Coffey
- 11: Rachel Mills, Isabel Bos, Evan Snyder, Jason Coffey
- 12: Carrie Ledet, Jeff Peerbolt, Rachel Mills, Isabel Bos, Evan Snyder, Jason Coffey
- 13: Kim Tyler
- 15: Evan Snyder
- 16: Schyler Sheltroun, Sophia Brown, Isabel Bos, Mark Jackson
- 17: Schyler Sheltroun, Rachel Mills, Sophia Brown, Carrie Ledet, Pam Wells, Riley Wells, Vincent Frank, Evan Snyder, Jason Coffey, Jeff Peerbolt
- 18: Riley Wells
- 19: Rachel Mills, Pam Wells, Carrie Ledet
- 20: Tom Busa

INSTRUMENTS

Piano	Kristin Goodyke (Sunday) Phyllis Ann Miner (Saturday)
Clarinet	David Yandl
Guitar	Ben Johnson
Marimba	Shanley Kruizenga
Percussion	Jack Latta
Violin	Letitia Jap
Viola	Leslie Van Becker
Cello	Jinn Shin
Contrabass	Mark Buchner

Considering Matthew Shepard

Text authors and publication credits.

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*The Fence (before)** Lesléa Newman

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*A Protestor ** Lesléa Newman / Additional italicized text by Craig Hella Johnson

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Fire of the Ancient Heart by Michael Dennis Browne and Craig Hella Johnson © 2015 by Michael Dennis Browne and Craig Hella Johnson. Used by kind permission. / *^Genesis 4:10 / #Rumi / ~William Blake*. With thanks to Tom Burritt – percussion consultation and special arrangement

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*The Fence (one week later)** Lesléa Newman

*Stars** Dennis Shepard Statement to the Court

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Recitations I-X compiled from news reports and crafted by Craig Hella Johnson and Michael Dennis Browne.

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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.

Considering Matthew Shepard was developed with the support of Conspirare. Please visit conspirare.org to learn more about this project and learn more about the many individuals and organizations who support this work.

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.

Holland Chorale and Park Church gratefully acknowledge the assistance and support of the following, without whom today's performance would not have been possible:

The volunteer leadership and staff of Holland Chorale and Park Church

Jennie Reyes, Holland Chorale Operations Manager

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Holland Museum/Ricki Levine

Holland Historical Trust/David Hawley-Lowry

West Michigan Piano/Dennis Buteyn

Orchestra Contractor: Leslie Van Becker

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