

THE MOUNTAIN

Four Songs for Voice and Piano

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COMPOSER'S NOTE

Denise Levertov was born in England in 1923 and served as a nurse in London during the bombings of World War II. She spent most of her career in the United States and was active as a feminist and a political activist during the Vietnam War. In the 1980s she moved to the Pacific Northwest and taught at the University of Washington and Stanford. She died in 1997.

The composer first encountered the poetry of Denise Levertov during time spent in the Pacific Northwest. The mountain of which she writes made a very memorable impression each morning as he looked across Puget Sound at Mount Baker and Mount Rainier, very much as described in the poems.

THE MOUNTAIN was composed during a residency at The Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences in Rabun Gap, Georgia, in October 2007.

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POEMS

Settling

I was welcomed here – clear gold
of late summer, of opening autumn,
the dawn eagle sunning himself on the highest tree,
the mountain revealing herself unclouded, her snow
tinted apricot as she looked west,
tolerant, in her steadfastness, of the restless sun
forever rising and setting.

Now I am given
a taste of the grey foretold by all and sundry,
a grey both heavy and chill. I've boasted I would not care,
I'm London-born. And I won't. I'll dig in,
into my days, having come here to live, not to visit.
Grey is the price
of neighboring with eagles, of knowing
a mountain's vast presence, seen or unseen.

Elusive

The mountain comes and goes
on the horizon,

a rhythm elusive as that of a sea-wave
higher than all the rest, riding to shore
flying its silver banners –

you count to seven, but no,
its measure

slips by you with each recurrence.

Effacement

Today the mountain
is cloud,
pale cone of shadow
veiled by a paler scrim –

majestic presence become
one cloud among others,
humble vapor,
barely discernible,

like the archangel walking
with Tobias on dusty roads.

Open Secret

Perhaps one day I shall let myself
approach the mountain –
hear the streams which must flow down it,
lie in a flowering meadow, even
touch my hand to the snow.
Perhaps not. I have no longing to do so.
I have visited other mountain heights.
This one is not, I think, to be known
by close scrutiny, by touch of foot or hand
or entire outstretched body; not by any
familiarity of behavior, any acquaintance
with its geology or the scarring roads
humans have carved in its flanks.
This mountain's power
lies in the open secret of its remote
apparition, silvery low-relief
coming and going moonlike at the horizon,
always loftier, lonelier, than I ever remember.

