

CLEARING

Kenan Serenbetz

1. Grace 2. Ageless Waters 3. Lost 4. Lone Hill 5. Dispossessed
6. Wetlands 7. Golden Hour 8. Land of Neglect 9. Cottonwood
10. Through the Fields 11. Treasure 12. Waxwing

Kenan Serenbetz

CLEARING

©© 2021 Kenan Serenbetz
© 2021 sweet flag song (ASCAP)
All rights reserved.
Unauthorized duplication prohibited.



All music composed, performed, and recorded by Kenan Serenbetz
Artwork by Kenan Serenbetz

with
Maren Day and Morgan Kavanagh - voice (4, 5, 10, 12)

Mixed by Doug Malone at JAMDEK
Mastered by Mike Nolte at Eureka Mastering

©© 2021 Kenan Serenbetz
© 2021 sweet flag song (ASCAP)

Grace

surrounded by grace
reconciled
wading through tall grass

Ageless Waters

I rest on
fallen pines
in a soft rain

gazing through
reflections
of my grief

to pray for
this lake of
ageless waters

as I watch
listlessly
gathering darkness

Lost

made of the wood and earth and water
longing to return to that lost place
I hear a growing roar
and feel an approaching tremor

Lone Hill

figures vanish
and leave in their wake
voids of knowledge
colorless fields

as they gather
on a lone hill
away in the plains
and keep solemn watch

beneath the ruins
of an altar
where winds do not reach

Dispossessed

haunted by regret
wandering
through fields of goldenrod

I search among the grasses
for the
relics of what was here long ago

I am within you

am I poor in spirit?
consumed by
endless thought
never hidden from your gaze

I am within you

dispossessed of relationship
wanting what has passed away

do not forget the silhouette of my face

only you know my error
and what has bloomed for the last time

listen for my voice

Wetlands

I follow the firefly's light
through an unknown wetland
the call of the yellowthroat
mingles with the flowering elder
and all is made new again

Golden Hour

running from the horizon
I hide my face
were you calling to me then?

treefrogs leaping underfoot
in that hopeful golden hour
when the summer was still young

Land of Neglect

juncos sing from the boughs of this old oak forest
as the days quicken and our paths entwine further
bound to the spirit
the melody echoes beyond recognition

where do these colors come from rising at dusk
parting the clouds for a glimpse of the sky's true name
woven with longing
into this landscape that has known me from my youth

shadows of bare branches grow in the fading light
where the deer silently encircled the path
land of long neglect
help me to know in full what is only seen in part

Cottonwood

walking beneath the cottonwood
where as before we once gathered
with one accord
lighting a path away from sorrow
amongst the snows of summer

Through the Fields

as I walk through rich fragrant fields
hearing the din of friends dear to me

I will renounce this self-sown grief
and open to rivers of brightness

call upon my nobler nature
to shine forth love and gratitude

remember the sunlight
remember the seasons
the distance is fading
remember

joining our hands in brotherhood
rejoicing and sharing in each day

put off your sorrow
put off your shame
I know your spirit
I know your mind
I will be with you

Treasure

held in light as a treasure
pondered in the heart alone
bounty and glory and splendor
in a fragile floating world
I cannot speak what I feel

I give you my love
take of it freely
you are with me now
eternally bound

Waxwing

what has followed me here?
bonded to tears of parting
whose memories are these?
claiming part of my nature

clouds of waxwings alight
on a cedar tree
oracles of the air
awaken and rejoice

revived from a broken life
blessings flood the open sky
I will begin again
joining in a love unconstrained
I will reach out beyond
these walls of fear and pain

CLEARING

A few years ago, I had a health crisis in which I was unable to use my voice without great pain. In this difficult period, most of my regular pursuits were brought to a screeching halt. Grief and anxiety carried me into a new awareness, in which I registered for the first time the great diversity of life that our landscape holds. I plunged myself headlong into learning the names and characters of the plants who had surrounded me for years.

As anyone who comes to appreciate their local ecology knows, the learning process is fraught. Knowledge comes with sorrow. To learn the history of our land is to learn the history of colonialism and genocide, not only of native peoples and cultures but also of the plants, animals, and ecosystems that grew together with them. Mourning the devastation of climate change and habitat loss moves from general to specific, for unique beings and ways of life, with names and habits and stories.

We are tasked in our short lives with imagining a new way forward and fighting to bring it to fruition. But without awareness and specificity our imaginations are grasping at straws. It is not enough to simply wish for abstract conceptions of “wildness”, connection or preservation, or something “green.” True justice must come from relationship. This music, at its core, is documentation of my fraught and clumsy attempts to build that relationship. It is permeated with grief; I myself cannot disentangle what part of it is for the land and the beings that I was coming to know, and what is for the deep sadness and panic over the temporary loss of a vital part of my identity. It is surely both.

At its best, I hope this will serve as an invitation. Learn about the land you live on. Who lived here before you? What people? What animals? What plants? How have things changed? Who and what has survived, resisted, thrived? And most importantly, how will these relationships change you and the shape of your imagination?

Kenan Serenbetz
April 2021

I often find myself wondering which artistic outputs are not fruitions of truth, but instead synonyms of something true. Expressions of the chase for truth and beauty are at the core of so much creation, but where is that place in which a person's expressive voice conjures something brand new, but in the form of something almost undeniable? What is the sound or image of disclosure, rather than personal pronouncement? While I'll be the first to acknowledge the navel-gazing nature of these questions, they are also the questions that often help to develop an artistic discipline and improvement of craft.

Kenan Serenbetz's CLEARING is the result and documentation of a long-developing discipline that is equally a personal musical language as it is an embodiment of ethics, spiritual philosophy and eco-politics. Recorded over the period of one year, with material stretching back longer, it is Kenan's exploration and interrogation of song-craft and song-form, and a work of explicitly bioregional music. The ubiquity of musical expression around the world does not inhibit the utterly unique expressions of the land in which music is made. In Kenan's words, "When we listen to music from more explicitly and often self-consciously land-based cultures, we are quite literally listening to the sounds of the land and other-than-human beings translated into the human musical idiom. From the shapes of the melodies, to the instruments being played, all are informed by or created from this relationship."

A student and practitioner of many different musical languages and traditions, Kenan's sonic palette and the musical details of CLEARING are brilliantly rich and yet entirely culled from the colors and behavior that the Midwestern prairies contain and ask for. The full-throated woodiness of a down-tuned banjo that drives many of these songs stemmed from personalizing Kenan's study of Okinawan sanshin, while the reed organ textures that underpin the music stem from the presentational nature of Western Early Church Music. This is not to point out a forced eclecticism or bold mismatch of elements, but rather to say that CLEARING's "orchestra" is a deeply thought-out sonic system of tools meant to, above all, accompany the voice. The reeds of the organ and harmonium, the ringing of the autoharp plucked like a zither, and even a self-welded metal box percussion instrument – they all vibrate together, both literally and figuratively, as a means of accompaniment – sounds that are inextricable from the voice, and therefore, the song.

The musical material, despite its strong and direct inspirations, is not self-generative however. To make music that reflects the truths of a land and lets an environment express itself requires a look into how the land is in transition: how the practices of native peoples cultivated a vast and ancient garden, and what problems have arisen from our current interactions with the very same land. This music sits at the center of a beautiful paradox in this regard. Kenan's desire to make music that "restores the land to the primacy it once enjoyed, before the systematic destruction of natural communities and land-based practices," acknowledges the pain inherent in knowing the sacredness being profaned, and yet still expresses the awe that is equally inherent in the very same observation. It is a humble contradiction to make an almost protagonist-less personal narrative. The sound of giving life to things in the midst of destruction – though also in the midst of the constant decay and repair cycle. The paradox of a full image with all its uneven details – the clean line of horizon and the uneven grasses against it. The overgrowth that is undergrown. The simple presentation of the ineffable, and the human emotions guiding us to the utterly literal and unmetaphorical place we've lived on, but not in. Music in which mystery is a paradigm – not an irreconcilable truth between paradigms.

Practically speaking about the songs, CLEARING is Kenan's first recorded embodiment of practical musical concepts that reflect these ideas – all pitch is constructed with horizontality in mind. In other words, rather than a melody supported by harmonic accompaniment, each line of pitch has its own independent logic that can stand as a ballast on its own. Systems are built and grown around and alongside each other, rather than a singular purpose being served.

The songs are presented as environments entered and exited – the rhythmic languages of the songs, whether slow and languid, or subdivided and marked, give the impression that they could repeat to infinity. A careful construction of rhythmic execution, style and phrasing, they provide the listener with an internal logic that is apparent in the very opening moments of each piece, and yet are conferred with a certain level of detachment and distance to allow for ease of entrance and exit.

I'll detail my own personal experience of this music more after listing some entrances into the songs themselves, but I should say that I, a friend and supporter, have had my own relationship with this material reframed many times through the years. The exacting and noble goals of this music may seem hyper-specific to some, though to me they are in service of a familiar and humble aim to reunify the whole. To acknowledge brokenness in its present forms, and then rejoin the pieces. The theologian Paul Tillich suggested that we consider the word “separation” instead of “sin” and “reunion” instead of grace – not as replacement words, but just as help. I hope this music can provide a similar help.

GRACE – The image of grasses becoming sea. The motion in the image, or the “motion” of reunion itself. The movement of forgiveness and permission.

“He cannot take one mouthful unaware
That he is floundering in a sea of care.”

— Attar —

AGELESS WATERS – A brief sojourn away from the Midwest prairie's specifics, and the fragility that comes as soon as we leave behind the human dominated world.

"Prayer begins at the edge of emptiness."

—Abraham Joshua Heschel—

LOST – Marcel Peres, the early music maverick and a mentor of Kenan's, says that in the early days of the Church, the organ and voices were never heard simultaneously. They would play in alternatim, where the choir would sing one verse and the organ would play the following. The organ would use the melody as the cantus firmus and draw it out into long notes while improvising around it. He says this signifies the physical qualities of the Word. The word physicalized – the separate and the contemplative. The difference and sameness of action and contemplation.

“There is greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question.”

— Thomas Merton —

LONE HILL – What can lack do, and what does it do? A voice sings out, either in spite of desecration or because of it. Wendell Berry says "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places."

DISPOSSESSED – Are destruction and preservation forces to be used, or are they forces inevitably at work? At the very least, nothing is passive.

“The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

— Wendell Berry

WETLANDS – The feeling of renewal that can come from recognizing our images as reality. They are not just to look at – they are real. The mystic Hildegard of Bingen said “Divinity is aimed at humanity.”

GOLDEN HOUR – Confronting our worthiness of receiving grace and love is a confrontation in and of itself. In Attar's Conference of the Birds the image of a reflecting pool gives some readers a sense of inner calm and others a shot of electricity, asking the reader to look at what's hardest to look at. Richard Rohr says, “Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable.”

LAND OF NEGLECT – The un-separation, which is maybe the best synonym we have for “revelation”. How can we reach to be not a protagonist but a participant?

“Let everything that is planned come true.”

— Andrei Tarkovsky —

COTTONWOOD – Summer snow and sweet release. The musician Anthony Braxton, an endless wealth of imagination, often says “hurray for unity”.

THROUGH THE FIELDS – Life opening and closing. This cycle of decay and repair – is it in spite of us or alongside us? Another icon of imagination and sometimes collaborator of Braxton, Cecil Taylor says, “To feel is perhaps the most terrifying thing in this society.”

TREASURE – It's a love song. What is kept and protected can also grow and thrive. To keep spoken languages alive, we can't just say that we are “protecting” them, we must actively use them as an act of protection.

WAXWING – The weight and gravity of growth, or the recognition of progress that is coupled with a wave of heaviness. "Be joyful because it is humanly possible," says Wendell Berry. Heschel says “Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart.”

And so the endless pilgrimage continues.

Kenan is a long-time close personal friend, and in turn a reliable and indispensable collaborator, sounding board, and a deep inspiration. Such an abundance of ideas that have ever entered my head have been filtered through discussions and trials and errors with Kenan before I bring them into any tangible existence, and I'm also very grateful to have provided a similar stimulation for Kenan through the years. I know Kenan will always gladly give credit to those close to him who have helped him develop ideas, hear-out ponderings, and help elucidate the process of turning ideas into music. To be in those ranks has made this record carry some extra heft, no doubt. When I first listened to “Grace” at the beginning of this album, I was genuinely overcome. At first, it felt something almost like a graduation – a lovely feeling when a loved one is realizing a long sought-after idea. But as I've lived with these recordings a little longer, the feeling has become a little clearer.

I've been a part of this music more directly in the past – I've played the metal box percussion parts (we were calling it the “Kenalin” then), I've trial-sang the chorales, and rang some goat bells. I've also been along the ride for some recording false-starts, the search for the right analog gear, the repair of said gear, the acquisition of instruments I'd never heard of. The music still, in this recorded form, feels like a search to me. And now, I'm one step more outside, in the same lucky position as you, a listener– at first I thought I could write a note contributing some loving detail alongside some sort of levity to scale against the weightiness of the music. But the truth is, the weight is real, and in my eyes and ears, necessary and easily earned – so here I sit feeling a very lovely form of heavy.

I've also had the great privilege of co-teaching music alongside Kenan in the past, where I got to witness him so comfortably meet young musicians where they were, respect their sounds wholeheartedly, and consider even the most incremental growth as growth nonetheless. I find it freeing to think of self-analysis (whether through religious/spiritual, psycho-analytical, or other means) as a picture of a person in motion. Not a complete image, and also not one of static truth, but of momentary observation. So, perhaps CLEARING is not to me graduation or achievement, nor is it purely a search, but an image of a person in motion, who happens to be searching, but who has also been sitting very still for a long time.

Ethan T. Parcell
Chicago, IL
April 2021