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Music for Seven Poems

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(The next seven poems were set to music by Dr. Wm. P. Latham. The cantata was called, "Music For Seven Poems", and was performed at the Spring Festival of the State College of Iowa, in the spring of 1958)
THE PLOWBOY

I'll plow myself a pillow,
I'll plow myself a bed,
Time goes by like a furrow
And soon I will be dead.

Then the field may wither,
Then the plow may rust,
And the gate sag on its hinges
While I sleep because I must.

And I will not remember
That I was tamed for this:
To work in the yoke of summer
For the wage of winter's kiss.
THE SUPPLICANT

I try, when I awake, on a bright Sunday morning
Slowly, slowly, to open both my eyes
Just enough to see the clock, then sink down under
The clear waves of rectitude, a private exercise.

There time doesn't matter and nobody calls me,
I lie back and float on a summoning bell
That tells the other people—not me, but other people—
To gather up their pitchers and come to the well.

I sail into grace, half awake, half asleep,
Like an angel from a cloud, or a turtle from the sea,
And protect myself from evil, temptation and the devil
By offering up a morning's rest to hard-worked men like me.
THE HAPPY FARMER

This farm where I live
It's poor and it's small,
But I'd rather live here
Than on no farm at all.

So here's where I live
With my cow and my hens,
With a tumbled down barn
Filled with rickety pens.

It's true I work hard
But the weeds they grow big
And smother the corn
I need for my pig.

This shiftless old house
Has a sieve for a roof -
That the world it ain't perfect
My farm is the proof.
THE HUNTER

You cannot kill the white-tailed deer
With tears in autumn when the mellow wind
Fingers the apples and pulls down the grapes
One by one from the cluster, blows the frost
On breathy mornings into a comet's shape.

You cannot kill the white-tailed deer
With kindness no matter how your hounds
Worry them with affection, you will find
Trails through the empty woodlands like the bare
Patterns of their hoofprints in your mind.

You must be ruthless, hunter, and stalk them down
From behind the trees, in covert, blind and mire
And slaughter them one by one as the hunter's moon
Bloodies its face with clouds of drifting fire.
TRUANT

Little rowdy yellow duck, darting from your mother,
Scooting after water bugs, legging it from shelter,
Wading in the mudbank, winking at the sun
With your shorty rumpled rump, tumbling helter-skelter.

Little roly poly duck, scrambling toward adventure,
Hiding in the tangled grass, diving in the middle
Of muddy weedy water dips, wavering for balance,
And flip-flop, somersault, sit down in the middle.

Little weary ragged duck, frightened of the shadows,
Streak and dimple in and out, stagger home to rest,
Oh you droopy fuzzy head, snuggled in your pillow,
Underneath your mother's wing, safe against her breast.
LOST

I hear a child crying
as lonesome as water
far off in the night
sobbing low over stone.

I hear a child crying
as lost as a kitten
out there in the wilderness
small and alone.

I hear a child crying
wild and forsaken,
caught by the dark
and no way to go home.
EACH SPRING

When ducks print signs in the mud for the farmer to read,
And a thawing roof yields smoke in the sun at noon,
And a map of the earth's position shows through the snow,
The news becomes music to me like a newly made tune.

When the drying fields are ready to take the plow,
And pups tumble out of the barn like squirrels from a tree,
And a schoolgirl under her breath hums the sadness of love,
And plum blossoms shatter, like sap there rises in me

The excitement that comes with promise of greenleaved earth,
With another day to gather the blossom of hours,
And another dancestep to marvel how we are free
From the laws of winter - the season of hope is ours.