Cap Rock Wind

for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra (1,1,1,alto sax,1; 1,1,1; el gt, vib, pno; strings)
text from House of Earth by Woody Guthrie (1947)

by Kyle Gann
(2015-16)
In 1947, folk singer Woody Guthrie wrote a novel titled *House of Earth*. It was a story of living in the Texas panhandle region during the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Guthrie was clearly inspired by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, but why he failed to publish *House of Earth* remains something of a mystery. He apparently sent it to Hollywood studios in hopes of having it made into a film, but since the first half of the novel centers around a startlingly erotic sex scene and the second half graphically describes a birth nine months later, the chances of it being turned into a film in the 1950s, or even afterward, seem remote to say the least. In any case, this beautiful novel was finally published in 2013 by Infinitum Nihil, the publishing company founded by actor Johnny Depp.

In fall of 2015, the ensemble Contemporaneous asked me to write them a piece. I wanted to take advantage of their expert conductor, David Bloom, to employ the kind of intricate ensemble polyrhythms that I rarely get to indulge in with a chamber orchestra; I wanted to also benefit from their dynamic mezzo-soprano Lucy Dhegrae. I pored through various texts, many of them my usual suspects, but nothing seemed suitable until I found *House of Earth*, with its rambling descriptions of weather whose riotous lists of objects and verbs accumulate into a Gertrude Stein-like ecstasy. So I finally settled on an unusual form, two movements played without pause, one instrumental and rhythmically fluid, the other vocal and more operatic. As I composed, each movement borrowed more and more from the other, tying them more closely together. (Of course I considered quoting tunes of Woody's songs, but they would have pushed the music in a very different direction - one already well explored by American composers of the 1930s - and added copyright issues.)

The piece is about wind, and, in the first half, is a depiction of high winds and associated weather, climaxing in a cathartic rainstorm. The novel is about a couple, Tike and Ella May, living in the Cap Rock region of the Texas panhandle and trying desperately to protect their fragile, rented frame house from the violent vicissitudes of the weather during the Dust Bowl. Tike has received a pamphlet from the government explaining that adobe houses stand up better under the southwestern wind and rain and sleet and ice than wooden houses do - thus his dream, a House of Earth. I grew up in Texas, but had never before made the state a subject of one of my compositions. Out of many such passages, I copied out 1500 words or so that I found amazingly musical in their repetition and nuance, whittled those down to about 500, and sought and received the kind permission of Woody Guthrie Publications to use them. The first 3/5 of the text describes the weather
in the Texas panhandle; the remainder charts the thoughts of the woman in the novel as her baby is coming into the world.

Text:

[p. 77] The noise of things moving in the wind came to their ears like the flapping of wings. Dry stalks of corn, higuera, tumbleweeds, and sticker bushes rattled as they bounced against the boards, as they blew loose from their places and leaped, jumped, sailed, and whistled past the ends of the shed. The world moved around about them. All of the face of nature crept, crawled, wiggled, shook, watched its chance, and then howled away over the grass roots...
In their hearts this was a sorrowful season, an old and a dry season, a season of good-bye and parting, a season when all of the things of the plains, the twigs, grasses, hays, flowers, stalks, and the shucks, the things grown of the earth, take leave without further crying, and blow away somewhere to be whipped apart, to be parted and parted again.

[p. 91] No place on the earth is closer to the sun than these upper flat plains. No spot on the globe is closer to the wind than here on these north panhandle plains. Nowhere could the wind blow the rain any colder than here, nor any harder could the rain ever hope to fall, nor any longer could it stand. None of the world's winds blow dustier nor drier, nor harder day in and day out. Nowhere on the planet do the winds and the sun suck the grass, the leaves, the cattle, sheep, hogs, chickens, dogs, cats, people any drier. Nowhere could the winter blow any icier, the blizzards howl any lonesomer, nor the smoke from ranch house chimneys get whipped out any quicker, nowhere could the icicles hang down any longer, or could the whole world freeze in two minutes any glassier.

[p. 152] Here are the people in this room coming and going. They go and they come in and through, in and through one another. And the people of the farms and the ranches around, they go and they come in and through, in and through one another. Like the weeds, the stems, the hay, straws and lints, like the powders, chalks, dusts arise and fall and pass in and through, in and through one another in the winds, the sun. And the people are all born from one and they are really all one. And all of the upper north plains are one big body being born and reborn in and through one another, and those also of the lower south plains...
And there are a few people that work to hurt, to hold down, to deny, to take from, to cheat, the rest of us. And these few are the thieves of the body, the germs of the disease of greed, they are few but they are loud and strong....
This is the only one truth of life that takes in all of the other works.
This is the greatest one single truth of life and takes in all other books of knowing.

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Cap Rock Wind

Woody Guthrie
1947

Quiet but restless, relentless
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Alto Sax.

Bsn.

Pno.

E. Gtr.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

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*The intent here, and at other similar places, is to sound like the whistling of the wind through a tight place, so that the pitch rises and falls but not the dynamic; in other words, do not diminuendo within each note.*
Cap Rock Wind
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Cap Rock Wind
Cap Rock Wind
Cap Rock Wind
Cap Rock Wind
Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Alto Sax.
Bsn.
Hn.
C Tpt.
Tbn.
Vib.
Pno.
E. Gtr.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Cb.

Cap Rock Wind
Cap Rock Wind
Slower, walking tempo

The noise of things

Fl.
Vib.
Pho.
E. Gtr.
S. Solo
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Ve.
Cb.

230

Fl.
Vib.
S. Solo
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Ve.
Cb.

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them. All of the face of na-ture crept, crawled, wig-gled, shook, watched its chance, and then
howled away over the grass roots. In their hearts this was a sorrowful season, an
old and a dry season, a season of good-bye and parting, a season when all of the things of the plains, the twigs,
Gras-ses, hays, flow-ers stalks, and the shocks, the things grown of the earth, take leave without further crying, and blow a-

way somewhere to be whipped a-part, to be parted and parted again. No place on earth is closer to the sun._
S. Solo

No where could the wind blow the rain any colder than here, nor any harder could the rain ever hope to fall, nor than these upper plains. No spot on the globe is closer to the wind than here on these north plains.
None of the world's winds blow dustier, nor drier, nor harsher day

a - ny lon-ger could it stand.
in and day out. No-where on the pla-net could the win-ter blow away i-ci-er, the bliz-zards howl...
any, nor the smoke from ranch house chimneys get whipped out any quicker,

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no-where could the icicles hang any longer, or could the whole world freeze in any glass-er.
Here are the people in this room going and coming. They go and they come in and through, in and through one another.

And the people of the farms and the ranches a-round, they go and they come in and through, in and through one another.
Like the weeds, the stems, the hay, straws and lints, like the powders, chalks, dusts a rise and
fall and pass in and through, in and through one another in the winds, the sun. And the people are all born from
one, and they are really all one. And all of the
up-per North plains are one big bo-dy
be-ing born and re-born in and

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through one another. And there are a few people that work to hurt, to hold down, to deny, to take from, to cheat, the
rest of us. And those few are the thieves of the body, the germs of the disease of greed, They are few
but they are loud and strong.  This is the only one truth of life that takes in all of the other works.
Slightly faster but not as fast as the beginning

\( \text{Slightly faster but not as fast as the beginning } \)

\( \text{Slightly faster but not as fast as the beginning } \)

This is the greatest single truth of life and takes in all other books of knowing.

\( \text{This is the greatest single truth of life and takes in all other books of knowing. } \)

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Germantown, NY