

HUNGER

(With lights low, audience enters and gets seated. Tamsen is lying on stage. On screen is the following text, dissolving from one line to the next, in a loop: "Where is the West / Who shall fix its limits? / He who attempts it will soon learn / that it is not a fixed line / but a floating line." Lights go to black, text disappears, replaced slowly by the "mountain" scene. Lights up on Tamsen, who is lying on the stage.)

I. My Beginning Stirs Again

TAMSEN: How could I foresee my end
In that soft spring?
I began my journey certain
That what was unknown
Would be made smooth and easy.

I forgot the anger of the land.

Now in the white silence I remember:
Wind blowing back the hair of the ocean,
Sunlight slicing through clouds,
Spring birds circling south.

Under the cities of snow,
Under the whirlpool of leaves,
My beginning stirs again:
Out of the white spring of my unbelief
A far blue country parts the sky.

II. WALKING MUSIC I (Orchestra)

(Lights down on Tamsen, up on orchestra. Only guitar is present, and begins the "Walking Music". Tamsen begins to walk around the space, carrying her bag, and is joined by the other three musicians. All reach the stage, and take places as the "mountain" scene becomes the "prairie" scene. Tamsen begins to write in her diary.)

PART ONE - PRAIRIE

III. The Wagons

TAMSEN: (spoken): April 15, 1846, Leaving Springfield, Illinois

The wagon's move first,
one directly behind the other,
but then straggling –
friends want to ride beside friends,
and we pass back and forth.

I ride next to George.
We are like two voices of a strain
that come together and go apart
each echoing but singing independently
knowing the coming together in the end
will thread into a single theme.

We are surrounded by our friends
and at night we drown out the howling of the wolves
by the singing of hymns around the campfires.

Just sometimes, when we are fairly on our way
one behind the other
undulating over the prairies
we have much the appearance of a large funeral procession.

IV. HYMN – The Call For Reapers

TAMSEN: Far and near the fields are teeming
With the waves of ripened grain,
Far and near their gold is gleaming
O'er the sunny slope and plain.

Chorus:
Lord of harvest, send forth reapers
Hear us Lord to Thee we cry
Send them now the sheaves to gather
Ere the harvest time pass by.

Send them forth with morn's first beaming
Send them in the noon-tide's glare
When the sun's last rays are gleaming,
Bid them gather everywhere.

(Chorus)

O thou whom thy Lord is sending
Gather now the sheaves of gold.
Heavenward then at evening wending
Thou shalt come with joy untold.

(Chorus)

V. The Land Flattens

TAMSEN: (spoken): April 20, 1846: On the Missouri Prairie

The Land flattens out most suddenly, long stretches of flat fertile land, stands of young corn. The horizon is everywhere. We picnicked by a huge flat field with a sky broader and lower than ever in the East I could imagine. Broad, low and blue, with herds of clouds. The stretches are punctuated here and there with little isolated exclamation points – a house, a barn, a shield of trees. These trees show either that water is present or someone brought a sapling to shade his house. Otherwise there are none.

VI. We Change

TAMSEN: (spoken): June 16, 1846 – Along the Platte River

We change in relation to the land.
We become smaller.

VII. An End or a Beginning

TAMSEN: (spoken): July 18, 1846, Crossing the Great Divide

An end or a beginning:

is this where my being separates from itself
at one instant we are moving, bringing our existence
to a point where we are taken in, embraced without an end

but no love is so final merely
having traced ourselves back to our
Atlantic beginnings
we change from source to source
leap to a new love plunging westward
where once we looked backward all the way

now hesitant among the mountains
we pass across the invisible boundary
that divides self from self
and move forward heart-long towards the other sea
a twin
a mirror of ourselves

VIII. WALKING MUSIC II (Orchestra)

(Tamsen leaves the campsite and walks with only the horn player, who accompanies her as she walks and sings Fair and Tender Ladies during this walk. They rejoin the orchestra on stage, as the "prairie" scene changes to the "desert" scene.)

PART TWO – DESERT

IX. HYMN – It Is Well With My Soul

TAMSEN: When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

It is well (it is well), with my soul (with my soul).
It is well, it is well with my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trumpet shall resound and the Lord shall descend.
Even so – it is well with my soul.

(Chorus)

X. Miles of Brown-Gray Hills

TAMSEN: (spoken): July 28, at Fort Bridger

After miles of brown-gray hills and buff-colored deserts, Fort
Bridger appears wonderfully green, with rushing brooks and groves
of trembling aspens. It eases our thirst just to look at trees.

There has been a change of plans. A certain Mr. Lansford Hastings has sent us a
letter promising to meet us here and guide us across a shorter route to California.
But he is not here.

It is a two-hundred mile cutoff around the Great Salt Lake and across a small salt
Desert. George and the other men are eager to try it, and Mr. Bridger

encourages them, but the mountain men caution us against it since there is no clear trail.

My heart misgives me. We are all weary, many of us are sick. In a month summer will be over. Our supplies diminish. How can we trust an absent guide?

XI. A White Blindness

TAMSEN: (spoken): August 14, 1846, Crossing the Wasatch Mountains

A white blindness of salts:
it makes us squint
it glares like snowfields under the sun
it glimmers and quivers in snaky heat waves
our hair clothing wagons
covered with white dust
we cannot stop to wash away

After three days and nights in this desert of salt I am obliged to give the children little cubes of sugar to suck on to ease their thirst. Finally, in the cold night, we sleep. Towards dawn with a mouth dry as paper, I dream of a morning rain storm.

That gray satin quilt the ocean
is ruffled by the rain

sterling arrows fall on it
iron muscles underneath the quilt

let the steel drumbeats celebrate
the yielding beast the mixing elements

let gray behemoths of rain
enter and flood my valleys

XII. Traveling Blind

TAMSEN: (spoken): September 5, 1846, In the Salt Desert

We are traveling blind.
The trail thins and disappears
diminished
like a river to a stream the stream snakes down
to a trickle in the ground

we are in the youngest canyon and still we climb
carving out on the steepest ridge
an inch-long place

chaos of brush and boulders
tangles of cottonwoods and willow
we fumble through
the same unpassable passage
our days become
like cliffs
around, around

we are playing blindman's bluff, hands outstretched:
we are children in the dark who cannot find
one mapped familiar face.

XIII. Last Mountains

TAMSEN: (spoken): September 25, 1846, Near Mary's River

Finally we are facing
the last mountains:
sometimes we walk
with the children
beside the wagon
to rest the lame oxen

the mountains rise
unscalable
the road is
a fiction
I am not inside this story
I am sitting
beside my husband
a frame
to the picture

there is surf I know
on the other side of the pass
somewhere beyond this wall
the end of land
and a summer sea.

XIV. WALKING MUSIC III (Orchestra)

(Tamsen leaves the campsite and walks with the clarinetist and hornist, who accompany her as she walks off the stage, around the hall, and back up the middle aisle. She is the melody of "The Dying Cowboy". They rejoin the orchestra on stage, as the "desert" scene changes to the "mountain" scene.)

PART THREE – MOUNTAIN

XV. Straining Downhill

TAMSEN: (spoken): October 28, 1846, On the Truckee River

(almost whispered)
Straining downhill
our axle breaks
the wagon falls
to one side but
George scoops out the
sleeping children

He starts to cut
a piece of wood
to mend the break
the chisel carves

an angry gash
across his hand

It is starting to snow.

XVI. Stopped

TAMSEN: (spoken): November 3, 1846, By Alder Creek

Stopped.
We can go no further.
Here steep in the mountains
the flakes thicken down
heavier and heavier
the white veils swirl between us
and the pass

Storms hammer us:
snow covers our shelter,
snow covers our wagons,
snow covers our oxen alive and dead.

We cut steps upward
to get to the light
watch westward over the crest

for help: no one comes

looking for food
George has shot
a coyote, an owl,

a wounded bear:
not enough food
to cure our hunger.

XVII. The Wound

TAMSEN: (spoken): December 5, 1846, By Alder Creek

The wound on George's hand does not heal. He feels ill and cannot stand up. The poison seems to be traveling up his arm to his shoulder. All the oxen and cows that were alive are dead and lost beyond recovery under the snow. Fires are unsafe, all water frozen, and the light shut out.

There is no choice. We have somehow survived these months in our dark hole under twenty feet of snow with nothing to fill us but gristle and dried buffalo hide. Many friends have died of hunger, of cold, of despair. And I am not sure, with only a few skins left, how long we can keep from eating the bodies of our dead as the others are doing.

I have come up out of our black hole beneath the snow (where the children sleep all day and George lies without stirring) to breathe the sharp white air.

these mountains
comfort me
a blazing army
straddling the sky
with their long pyramidal pines
dark green black green
trees trees a profusion of trees at last
against the emerald lake

these shapes these colors cleanse my eyes
and I turn back to our evil-smelling cave
a little stronger to confront
the next meal and the next day and the next.

XVIII. Must We Devour Ourselves

TAMSEN: (spoken): January 5, 1847, By Alder Creek

Must we devour ourselves
in order to survive?

is this new continent
a place where we can live

only by thrusting down
that fragile barrier

the ancient loathing
to eat each other's flesh?

for my children I find it
not so hard:

I must give them nourishment

from whatever source
they will not question where

but for me
I cannot see

how I could bear to live
by eating my friend's death

XIX. Empty Nest

TAMSEN: (spoken): March 15, 1847, By Alder Creek

I send my little ones away with the rescue party. George begs me to go with the children, but I can not, I will not leave him to die without my comfort. I dress them in layers of their best clothes and tell them to be sure to say to everyone the meet that they are the Donner's. I take them to the other camp, kiss them each, and beg them not to cry. I walk back alone to our empty nest.

(Bass player leaves stage at end of XIX, taking with him only his harmonica)

XX. How Can I Part

TAMSEN: (spoken): April 10, 1847, By Alder Creek

How can I store against this coming loss?
what faculties of the heart
can I bring against this parting?

we traveled across the land
towards winter not towards spring.

how can I part with
my sustaining love
who was father
to the whole camp

how can I learn to sleep
without his shoulder
to bed down my griefs?

the sun stays hidden
for months the sky has wept its snow

XXI. Hunger

TAMSEN: (spoken): April 12, 1847, By Alder Creek

Hunger.
The lightness of it.
I feel my legs will not hold me up any longer.
Sounds enter the senses sharply,
colors are very bright,
I am filled with light,
a music that the saints sought and called God.

I am not quite in touch with the ground,
I am outside by own body.
It would be easy to join the air and float into nothingness.

XXII. They will speak my words

TAMSEN: If my boundary stops here
I have daughters to draw new maps on the world
they will draw the lines of my face
they will draw with my voice

they will speak my words
they will speak my words
they will speak my words