

*The Gift of Life*, for soprano and piano (1990-1993)  
Chester Biscardi (1948)  
Text: Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov  
and Thornton Wilder

These songs were written for soprano Judith Bettina who first performed them with her husband, James Goldsworthy, in Palo Alto, California on June 27, 1993. The poem by Emily Dickinson, "Mama Never Forgets Her Birds," is set as a lullaby, written to celebrate the birth of their daughter, Ariana Tamar Goldsworthy. The cycle, continuing with "The 90th Year," by Denise Levertov, and an adaptation of the last lines of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, speaks of birth, life, memory, loss, death, and, finally, love.

Mama never forgets her birds,  
Though in another tree --  
She looks down just as often  
And just as tenderly

As when her little mortal nest  
With cunning care she wove --  
If either of her "sparrows fell,"  
She "notices," above.

ca. 1860 Emily Dickinson poetry is used by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College.

High in the jacaranda shines the gilded thread  
of a small bird's curlicue of song--too high  
for her to see or hear.

I've learned  
not to say, these last years,  
'O, look!--O, listen, Mother!'  
as I used to.

(It was she  
who taught me to look;  
to name the flowers when I was still close to the  
ground,  
my face level with theirs;  
or to watch the sublime metamorphoses  
unfold and unfold  
over the walled back gardens of our street . . .  
It had not been given her  
to know the flesh as good in itself,  
as the flesh of a fruit is good. To her  
the human body has been a husk,  
a shell in which souls were prisoned.

Yet, from within it, with how much gazing  
her life has paid tribute to the world's body!  
How tears of pleasure  
would choke her, when a perfect voice,  
deep or high, clove to its note unfaltering!

She has swept the crackling seedpods,  
the litter of mauve blossoms, off the cement path,  
tipped them into the rubbish bucket.  
She's made her bed, washed up the breakfast  
dishes,  
wiped the hotplate. I've taken the butter and  
milkjug  
back to the fridge next door--but it's not my place,  
visiting here, to usurp the tasks  
that weave the day's pattern.  
Now she is leaning forward in her chair,  
by the lamp lit in the daylight,  
rereading *War and Peace*.

When I look up  
from her wellworn copy of *The Divine Milieu*,  
which she wants me to read, I see her hand  
loose on the black stem of the magnifying glass,  
she is dozing.  
'I am so tired,' she has written to me, 'of  
appreciating  
the gift of life.'

"The 90th Year" (for Lore Segal) from the  
*Homage to Pavese* section of *Life in the Forest*  
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Soon we shall die  
and all memory of those we have lost  
will have left the earth . . .  
We shall die  
and all memory of those we have lost  
will have left the earth,  
and we ourselves shall be loved for a while  
and forgotten.  
The love will have been enough;  
all those impulses of love return to the love that  
made them.  
There is a land of the living and a land of the  
dead,  
and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only  
meaning.

Adapted from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Copyright © 1927, by Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. Copyright Renewal © 1955, by Thornton Niven Wilder