

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
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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
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