

Gwyneth Walker

*A Thousand Prayers*

*Songs for High Voice and Piano*  
on the poetry of Anne Sexton

1. Two Hands
2. Welcome Morning
3. What the Bird with the Human Head Knew
4. Snow
5. Look to Your Heart

# *A Thousand Prayers*

duration: circa 13 minutes

*A Thousand Prayers* is a song cycle based on poems by Anne Sexton (1928-1974 – Weston, MA). All of the texts are found in her book, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (published posthumously). The poet struggled with depression throughout her life. These last poems were written after Sexton's meeting with a Roman Catholic priest who, although unwilling to administer last rites, told her "God is in your typewriter." His words gave the poet the desire to continue living and writing.

The composer was drawn to this poetry due to the unique combination of the mundane and the sacred. The poet was seeking God in everyday places, in the daily routines of a homemaker. Is God *in the tailor, mending my pantsuit... in Boston, raised up by the skyscrapers? Where then?*

Her search is day-to-day, and it is all-consuming. *I cannot walk an inch without trying to walk to God. I cannot move a finger without trying to touch God.* She keeps her sense of humor: *I went to the bird with the human head, and asked, Please Sir, where is God?* Her quest is timeless and limitless. Yet, at the end, she finds answers within. *Look to your heart that flutters in and out like a moth.* God is there.

The musical settings vary between recitative style (when there are many words to present) and *cantabile* style (when certain key phrases elicit lyrical expression). In addition, there are moments of special imagery, such as the hand clapping in the first song ("Two Hands"), the singer walking about the stage searching for the *mysterious bird* ("What the Bird with the Human Head Knew"), the *falling snow* accompaniment ("Snow") and the *fluttering* tremoli ("Look to Your Heart"). The texts abound in imagery which is explored and enjoyed in the music.

Although Anne Sexton's life was often one of darkness, there are moments of pure ecstasy in her writing. She does indeed find divinity in her typewriter!

*Unwind, hands, you angel webs...cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun and applaud, world, applaud.*

---

Widely performed throughout the country, the music of American composer **Gwyneth Walker** is beloved by performers and audiences alike for its energy, beauty, reverence, drama, and humor. Dr. Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) is a graduate of Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. She holds B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. degrees in Music Composition. A former faculty member of the Oberlin College Conservatory, she resigned from academic employment in 1982 in order to pursue a career as a full-time composer. For nearly 30 years, she lived on a dairy farm in Braintree, Vermont. She now divides her time between her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut and the musical communities of Sarasota, Florida and Randolph, Vermont.

Gwyneth Walker has been a proud resident of Vermont for many years. She is the recipient of the Year 2000 "Lifetime Achievement Award" from the Vermont Arts Council as well as the 2008 "Athenaeum Award for Achievement in the Arts and Humanities" from the St. Johnsbury (VT) Athenaeum. In 2012, she was elected as a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Walker's catalog includes over 300 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. A special interest has been dramatic works that combine music with readings, acting, and movement. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E. C. Schirmer (choral and vocal music) and Lauren Keiser Music (orchestral and instrumental music).

Further information concerning Gwyneth Walker and her works is available at [www.gwynethwalker.com](http://www.gwynethwalker.com)

# *The Poems*

## TWO HANDS

From the sea came a hand,  
ignorant as a penny,  
troubled with the salt of its mother,  
mute with the silence of the fishes,  
quick with the altars of its tides,  
and God reached out of His mouth  
and called it man.

Up came the other hand  
and God called it woman.

The hands applauded.

And this was no sin.

It was as it was meant to be.

I see them roaming the streets:

Levi complaining about his mattress,

Sarah studying a beetle,

Mandrake holding his coffee mug,

Sally playing the drum at a football game,

John closing the eyes of the dying woman,

and some who are in prison,

even the prison of their bodies,

as Christ was prisoned in His body

until the triumph came.

Unwind, hands,

your angel webs,

unwind like the coil of a jumping jack,

cup together and let yourselves

fill up with sun

and applaud, world,

applaud.

## WELCOME MORNING

There is joy

in all:

in the hair I brush each morning,

in the Cannon towel, newly washed,

that I rub my body with each morning,

in the chapel of eggs I cook

each morning,

in the outcry from the kettle

that heats my coffee

each morning,

in the spoon and the chair

that cry "hello there, Anne"

each morning,

in the godhead of the table

that I set my silver, plate, cup upon

each morning.

All this is God,

right here in my pea-green house

each morning

and I mean,

though often forget,

to give thanks,

to faint down by the kitchen table

in a prayer of rejoicing

as the holy birds at the kitchen window

peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,

let me paint a thank-you on my palm

for this God, this laughter of the morning,

lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,

dies young.

## WHAT THE BIRD WITH THE HUMAN HEAD KNEW

I went to the bird  
with the human head,  
and asked,  
Please Sir,  
where is God?

God is too busy  
to be here on earth,  
His angels are like one thousand geese assembled  
and always flapping.  
But I can tell you where the well of God is.

Is it on earth?  
I asked.  
He replied,  
Yes. It was dragged down  
from paradise by one of the geese.

I walked many days,  
past witches that eat grandmothers knitting booties  
as if they were collecting a debt.  
Then, in the middle of the desert  
I found the well,  
it bubbled up and down like a litter of cats  
and there was water,  
and I drank,  
and there was water,  
  
and I drank.

Then the well spoke to me.

It said: Abundance is scooped from abundance,  
yet abundance remains.

Then I knew.

## SNOW

Snow,  
blessed snow,  
comes out of the sky  
like bleached flies.  
The ground is no longer naked.  
The ground has on its clothes.  
The trees poke out of sheets  
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
I bite it.  
Someone once said:  
Don't bite till you know  
if it's bread or stone.  
What I bite is all bread,  
rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
Today God gives milk  
and I have the pail.

## NOT SO, NOT SO

*(Look to Your Heart)*

I cannot walk an inch  
without trying to walk to God.  
I cannot move a finger  
without trying to touch God.

Perhaps it is this way:  
He is in the graves of the horses.  
He is in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees.  
He is in the tailor mending my pantsuit.  
He is in Boston, raised up by the  
skyscrapers.  
He is in the bird, that shameless flyer.  
He is in the potter who makes clay  
into a kiss.

Heaven replies:  
Not so! Not so!

I say thus and thus  
and heaven smashes my words.

Is not God in the hiss of the river?

Not so! Not so!

Is not God in the ant heap,  
stepping, clutching, dying, being born?

Not so! Not so!

Where then?  
I cannot move an inch.  
Look to your heart  
that flutters in and out like a moth.  
God is not indifferent to your need.  
You have a thousand prayers  
but God has one.



2

9

quick with the al - tars of the tides, and God reached out of His

12

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

(*mf*)

mouth and called it man. Up came the oth - er

16

hand and God called it wom - an. The hands ap -

19

plaud - ed. And this was no sin. It was as it was meant to be.

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

*Tap hands (as at beginning)*

**With motion (same tempo)**

22

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

**With motion (same tempo)**

*(mf)*

*with pedal*

25

*(mf)*

I see them roam - ing the streets:

28

Le - vi com - plain - ing a - bout his mat - tress, — Sar - ah stud - y - ing a

31

bee - tle, — Man - drake hold - ing his cof - fee mug,



4

34

Sal - ly — play - ing the drum at a foot - ball game, —

(as a Bass *f* drum)

8vb

36

John clos - ing the eyes of the dy - ing wom - an, — and

*mf*

loco

38

some who are in pris - on, — e - ven the pris - on of their bod - ies, as

41

Christ was pris - oned in His bod - y — un - til the tri - umph came. —

**Slightly slower**

*Tap hands (as before)*

44 *rit.*

47 *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *f* triumphantly

*a tempo* (♩ = 108) Un - wind, hands,

50 you an - gel webs, un -

53 *poco rit.* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*

wind like the coil of a jump - ing jack, cup to - geth - er and

*poco rit.* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*



65

you an - gel webs, cup to - geth - er and

68

let your - selves fill up with sun.

Clap hands together and release open, triumphantly, as if playing Crash Cymbals.

71

*rit.*

*Red.*

3'00"

## 2. Welcome Morning

With energy ♩ = 108 *f* joyfully

Wel - come morn - ing. —

With energy ♩ = 108  
*celebratory, as church bells ringing* *8va* -----

*f*

*Ped.*

4 *mf* recitative style

There is joy in all: in the hair I brush each

*mf*

*Ped.* with pedal

8

morn - ing, in the Can - non towel, new - ly washed, that I rub my bod - y with each

*Ped.*

11

morn - ing, in the chap - el of eggs I cook each morn - ing, in the

(mf) 8va

14

out - cry from the ket - tle that heats my cof - fee each morn - ing, in the

loco

16

spoon and the chair that cry "hel - lo there, Anne" each morn - ing, in the

rit. f mf a tempo

rit. (as a wave "hello") a tempo

mf

Ped.

19

god - head of the ta - ble that I set my sil - ver, plate, cup up - on each morn - ing.

22

*f*

All this is God, right here in my pea - green house each

24

*p*

morn - ing and I mean, though of - ten for - get to give thanks, - to

26

*mf*

faint down by the kit - chen ta - ble - in a prayer of re - joic - ing - as the

29

*rit.*

ho - ly birds at the kit - chen win - dow peck in - to their mar - riage of seeds

*rit.*

32 **Slower** *a tempo*

So while I think of it, let me paint a thank-you on my palm for this

**Slower** *a tempo*

*f*

*Red.*

35 *as before, recitative style* *p*

God, this laugh-ter of the morn-ing, — lest it go un - spo - ken. — The

*p*

*Red.*

38 *cresc.* *f*

joy that is - n't shared, I've heard, dies young.

*cresc.* *f*

*Red.*

42



### 3. What the Bird with the Human Head Knew

The singer explores the stage, moving in time with the 2/2 rhythm, looking for the mysterious bird.

At a walking tempo  $\text{♩} = 72$

*mf*

At a walking tempo  $\text{♩} = 72$   
["walking" motive]

*mf*

I

5

went to the bird with the hu - man head, and asked,

9

Please Sir, \_\_\_\_\_ where is God? \_\_\_\_\_

*rit.*

*rit.*

13 *Slower, freely* *f grandly*

God is too bus-y to be here on earth, His an - - gels

*Slower, freely*

*f*

*And.*

16

are like a thou - sand geese as - sem - bled

*And.*

19 *mf*

and al - ways flap - ping. But I can tell you where the

*p*

*And.*

The singer continues exploring.

23

*rit.*, *a tempo* (♩ = 72)

well of God is.

*rit.*, *a tempo* (♩ = 72)

[“walking” motive]

*mf*

27

*(mf)*

Is it on earth? I asked. (on earth?)

*(mf)*

31

*rit.*

**Slower**

*f*

He re-plied, Yes, It was dragged \_\_\_\_

*rit.*, *f*

**Slower**

*f*

*with pedal*

33

down from par - a - dise by one of the

The singer continues exploring.

, *a tempo* ( $\text{♩} = 72$ )

35

geese.

*a tempo* ( $\text{♩} = 72$ )  
["walking" motive]

*mf*

38

*mf*

I walked man - y days, past

42

wit - ches that eat grand - moth - ers knit - ting boot - ies \_\_\_\_ as

45

*rit.*

, **Slower**

if they were col - lect - ing a debt. Then, in the mid - dle of the

48

*with delicate excitement*

*lightly*

des - ert I found the well. It

51

bub - bled up and down like a lit - ter of cats and there was

54 *rit.*

wa - ter, and I drank, and there was

*rit.*

with pedal

56 *(rit.)* , Slowly

wa - ter, and I drank. Then the well spoke to me.

*(rit.)* , Slowly

glissando

3

Ped.

59 *f* *ecstatic*

It said: A - bun - dance is scooped from a -

*f*

with pedal

62

*accel poco a poco, gathering energy*

bun - dance, a - bund - dance is scooped from a - bun - dance, yet a -

*accel poco a poco, gathering energy*

65 *(accel.)*

bun - dance re - mains. \_\_\_\_\_

*(accel.)*

Singer's final exploration of the stage

68 *a tempo* (♩ = 72)

*rit. to end*

*p* (spoken on pitch)

Then I knew.

*a tempo* (♩ = 72)  
["walking" motive]

*rit. to end*

*dim.*

*p*

sva--

2'30"

# 4. Snow

*Very gently, as falling snow*

*slow, delicate arpeggios*

The first system of music is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The treble clef part begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and features a melodic line of quarter notes. The bass clef part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. The system concludes with a series of delicate arpeggios in both hands.

6 **Flowing** ♩ = 108

The second system starts at measure 6. The tempo is marked as 'Flowing' with a quarter note equal to 108 beats per minute. The treble clef part features a flowing eighth-note melody with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The bass clef part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The system ends with a repeat sign.

9 *p* in gentle wonderment

Snow, bles - sed snow comes

The third system begins at measure 9 and includes the vocal line. The treble clef part has a vocal melody with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment in the bass clef features a steady eighth-note accompaniment with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The system ends with a repeat sign.

11

out of the sky like bleached flies.

The fourth system starts at measure 11. The vocal line continues in the treble clef. The piano accompaniment in the bass clef features a steady eighth-note accompaniment with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The system ends with a repeat sign.



13

The ground is no long - er

*ped.*

15

na - ked. The ground has on its

*ped. simile*

17

clothes. The trees poke out of sheets and

*mp*

20

each branch wears the sock of God.

*mf*

23 *f*

Ah \_\_\_\_\_ There is

26 *poco rit.*

hope. \_\_\_\_\_ There is hope ev - ery - where. I

*f* *poco rit.*

29 *Slower* *p* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*

bite it. Some - one once said: \_\_\_\_\_ Don't bite till you know if it's

*Slower* *a tempo* (♩ = 108)

33 *p*

bread or stone. \_\_\_\_\_ What I bite is all bread, ris - ing, yeast - y,

38

*cresc.* *f*

as a cloud.

*cresc.* *f*

*pedal simile*

41

Ah

There is

44

hope.

There is hope ev - ery - where.

47

*poco rit.* *p* **Slower**

To - day God gives milk and

*poco rit.* **Slower**

*mf*

*ped.*

50

*rit.* , *a tempo* (♩ = 108)

I have the pail. —

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

*rit.*

*p*

*p*

53

55

Snow, —

57

*rit. to end*

bles - sed snow. —

*rit. to end*

*as falling snow*

*attacca*  
2'15"

## 5. Look to Your Heart

Gently flowing ♩ = 108

[walking to God]

The piano introduction consists of three measures in 4/4 time, marked *p*. The right hand plays a sequence of chords: F#m (F#2, A2, C#3), Dm (D2, F#2, A2), and F#m (F#2, A2, C#3). The left hand is silent.

*with much pedal*

4 *p* reverently, in awe

I can-not walk an inch \_\_\_\_\_ with-out try-ing to walk to

Measures 4-7: The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics "I can-not walk an inch" with a long note on "inch". The piano accompaniment continues with the same chord sequence as the introduction.

8

God. \_\_\_\_\_ I can-not move a fin-ger \_\_\_\_\_

Measures 8-11: The vocal line continues with "God." followed by a long note, then "I can-not move a fin-ger" with a long note on "ger". The piano accompaniment continues with the same chord sequence.

12

\_\_\_\_\_ with-out try-ing to touch God. \_\_\_\_\_

Measures 12-15: The vocal line continues with "with-out try-ing to touch God." with a long note on "God.". The piano accompaniment continues with the same chord sequence.

15 *rit.* **Slower** *a tempo, with growing excitement*  
*p espr.*

Per - haps it is this way: He is in the graves of the

*rit.* **Slower** *a tempo, with growing excitement*  
*8va* *(p) gently murmuring*

*ped.*

19

hors - es. — He is in the swarm, the fren - zy of the bees.

*ped.*

22 *mp* *mf*

He is in the tail - or mend - ing my pant - suit. — He is in Bos - ton, — raised

*mp* *mf*

*ped.*

25 *f*

up by the sky - scrap - ers. — He is in the bird, that shame - less —

*f*

*ped.*

28

*rit.* *p*

fly - er. \_\_\_\_\_ He is in the pot - ter who makes clay in - to a kiss.

*rit.* *p*

*rit.* *p*

31

*(rit.)* **Slower, freely** *p* *f* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *(f)*

Heaven replies: Not so! Not so! I say

*(rit.)* **Slower, freely** *a tempo* (♩ = 108)

*f*

35

thus and thus \_\_\_\_\_ and hea - ven smash - es my words. \_\_\_\_\_

*(f)*

*rit.* *rit.* *rit.*

38 *mf*

Is not God in the hiss of the riv - er?

*mf*

41 *p* *mf*

Not so! Not so! Is not

*p* *mf*

43

God in the ant heap - step - ping, clutch - ing, dy - ing, be - ing born?

46 *p* *rit.* *mf*

Not so! Not so! Where then? I

*p* *rit.* *mf*



28

49 (rit.) , a tempo (♩ = 108)

can - not move an inch.

a tempo (♩ = 108)

(rit.)

*p* fluttering

with much pedal

52

*p* lightly

Look to your heart \_\_\_\_\_ that flut - ters in and out like a

55

*poco rit.*  
*mp*

Slightly slower

moth. God is not in - dif - ferent to your need. You have a

*poco rit.*

Slightly slower

58

*mf*

, *p*

thou - sand prayers but God \_\_\_\_\_ has \_\_\_\_\_ one.

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

61

*p*

Rec. Rec.

*free recitative, on pitch*

63

*mf*

Look to your heart that flutters in and out like a moth.

Rec. Rec.

66

*rit.* *f* *Slowly* *p*

You have a thou - sand prayers but *Slowly*

*rit.* *f* *glissando* *(ring)* *Slowly*

*(let ring)*

Rec. Rec.

69

God \_\_\_\_\_ has one. \_\_\_\_\_

*p* *pp*

Rec.

3'00"  
 Total: 13'00"  
 July 19, 2014  
 New Canaan, Connecticut