

Your names toll in my dreams.
I pick up tinsel in the street. A nameless god
streaks my hand with blood. I look at the lighted trees
in windows and the spindles of pine tremble
in warm rooms. The flesh of home, silent.
How quiet the bells of heaven must be, cold
with stars who cannot rhyme their brilliance
to our weapons. What rouses our lives each moment?
Nothing but life dares dying. My memory, another obituary.
My memory is a cross. Face down. A whistle in high grass.
A shadow pouring down the sill of calamity.
Your names wake me in the nearly dark hour.
The candles in our windows flicker
where your faces peer in, ask us
questions light cannot answer.

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Program Note

The title of the poem, 26, refers to lives lost in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012. Among them were twenty children between the age of six and seven years old, as well as six adult staff members. This musical setting was written considering the continuing epidemic of violence in America, reflecting on the 346 mass shootings of 2017, and 340 occurring in 2018 according to the Gun Violence Archive. Among the myriad messages of the text, we are urged to remember the names of those who have been lost. We are also called to understand that light has not yet answered the questions our country has in the face of these dark tragedies.

"The imagery and language of the gun in the American memory must be buried. There is so much more to hold up, more to praise. This elegy is for all of us, because we all need to remember how to live in ways that reassert our humanity. This is one of the most literal poems I've ever written and it is like, as so much is in the times we live, an unanswerable flare, a cry for change."

—Rachel Eliza Griffiths