

1. Tell me about the inspiration behind composing this piece. What made you choose this poem? Why this topic?

When I first conceived of this piece, I thought about the most meaningful choral experiences for me as a performer and audience member. The memories that stood out were the ones with deep emotional impact, striking images, and new perspectives to ponder. That led me to seek out a poem in which I could express the deep grief I have experienced in losing close friends at a young age. As I searched through poetry, I became frustrated with poems that felt outdated, were too literal, or entirely abstract from the visceral experiences I associate with grief. I had nearly given up on this topic, thinking it might be too personal and specific, when I found '26' by Rachel Eliza Griffiths. As I read through it the first time, I related the poem and its images to my own experiences of grief, and the incessant questioning that is often connected. When I realized the poem had been written in immediate response to the Sandy Hook tragedy, I couldn't stop reading it. The more I understood the context of the language, the more poignant each image and emotion became. For me, many of the lines in the poem were revelatory, yet it left me dissatisfied with our country's response to over the last seven years.

2. The SSAA version was premiered by Cantala, but I want to make sure I get this right: Did you write the original piece specifically with Cantala in mind?

I absolutely had Cantala in mind as I composed the first iteration of this piece. During my time at Lawrence, I was consistently impressed by the group's unified sound, inventive programming, and ability to communicate subtleties within text. Being close to many members of the group, I was eager to give them more material that diverges from stereotypically 'feminine' treble choir music. I knew they would sensitively handle this subject matter, and I felt confident in their technical ability. That being said, I wanted to keep the vocal range and difficulty at a level that is approachable for a variety of groups.

3. What was it like then creating the SATB version? Was that a challenge? Did it come naturally?

Creating the SATB version was a rewarding challenge for me. Having years of experience in mixed choirs, I had a strong sense of what I wanted to create. At first, I found myself trapped in trying to preserve the spare texture of the original version. As soon as I broke from this mentality and added new material, there was an intuitive progression of ideas. I felt like an archaeologist uncovering layers of material that was already present in the character of the piece. I am pleased with the result of each version, and I think both are individually compelling.

4. I know you're a Lawrence grad yourself. What is it like to have the premieres of both versions of this piece happen in Appleton? What does that mean to you?

This performance will be my first time back in Appleton, and at Lawrence, after graduating and moving to Baltimore. There is a special comfort and beauty in having a home that continues to support me artistically; it means a lot to participate in these important conversations in a community I have lived in almost my entire life. It was especially powerful that the premiere with Cantala happened eight days after the local loss of firefighter Mitchell Lungaard. This was a jarring reminder that these events can happen anywhere, even in the safest of communities. I will continue to be a part of these conversations until there is no longer such an urgent need for change in our country.

5. What emotions do you hope this piece elicits from those who listen to it? What lessons do you hope they take with them?

My primary objective for this piece was to amplify the emotions I found in Rachel Eliza Griffith's poem. I was hoping to provide a wide spectrum of emotions that surround loss: questioning, helplessness, anger, anxiety, despair, and nostalgia, to name a few. The musical form reflects the continuing loss of life throughout our country and the world. Each new tragedy, so close to the last, interrupts the process of healing and creating systemic change. This poem reminds us that there is no easy solution. Until we fight for change, there will only be more suffering.